



Teaching *The God of Small Things* In Wisconsin: A Guide for Educators

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How to Use this Guide

A note on context: Reading Across Time and Space

The God of Small Things is a work of fiction. While its sociocultural and geopolitical contexts are integral to its impact, and to our critical reflections on the texts, it is important to remember that this is a work of literature and not a historical document. While literature can help us teach culture, history, psychology, current affairs, and so on, no one text can bear the burden of representing an entire nation, culture, or people. Please keep in mind as you teach this novel that this novel is written from a “minority” perspective even in its own cultural context and emphasize where you can the cultural specificities that make this book unique. Doing so in a clear and explicit way will also help you and your students appreciate the text’s ability to speak across time and space through its use of themes that many of us can relate to in complex and varied ways.

How to Use this Guide

The material in this guide is intended to provide all you will need to teach the novel and its context, from an “intro to India” to thematic units on close reading. We believe that the historical and cultural background is necessary to understanding the novel, its characters, and their decisions, but we encourage you to teach the novel thematically, and tie it into other disciplinary issues and regular features of your core curriculum wherever possible.

Readings, reviews and handouts: The reviews and readings in the guide are intended for teachers, but some of them may also work well as student handouts. These include readings that provide further background information for instructors as well as a variety of materials (especially from the internet) that might aid instructors in creating handouts, for example. You are encouraged, where possible, to use the materials in this guide as handouts for your students. These readings, handouts, and other materials are all available electronically at the Great World Text website: <http://humanities.wisc.edu/public-projects/gwt/2012-2013-project/>.

Lesson plans and suggestions for discussion: The lesson plans and activities provided in this guide are designed to allow you the opportunity to tailor the way you teach the text to your own course, time constraints, interests, and goals. The individual units could be taught over one or several days or weeks, and you can mix and match ideas from the various sections to create your own syllabus. Each thematic section includes a theme, followed by a set of questions, suggestions for discussion, and then specific quotes from the text that might be used to further discussion of the theme, with some critical assessment.

Focused Reading: although the guide assumes that one has read the entire novel, most units include specific passages for a focused reading—an area of the text from which the major ideas and themes of that unit are drawn and which can serve as an example of the major concepts discussed.

Close Reading Strategies

Most of the lesson plans include *focused readings*, which are passages from the novel that illustrate a certain theme or idea for that particular unit. During discussion and for assignments, students should be encouraged to support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Close reading lends itself well to group work and to small-group discussions, and is an excellent way for students to learn both critical thinking and analysis skills as they make connections, use evidence to support their views, and discuss the

impact of various literary techniques. For close reading to work successfully, it's important that the teacher always remind the students to point to the passage/line/occurrence that supports their position as they share their ideas. Close reading teaches students the difference between "opinion" or "personal reaction" and "analysis." It also helps teach students to assess the texts of its own merits, and avoid essentializing the cultural components of the text or stereotyping based on generalizations.

Reading a portion of text out loud as a class or small group, followed by group analysis, can be an excellent way to develop close reading skills in the classroom.

The guide also includes a [handout on close reading](#) that we encourage you to use in your classes.

Teaching Toward the Student Conference

Your students will come to Madison on March, 20, 2013 to present their work to their peers, listen to lectures from experts on the text, and workshop with UW faculty. At the conference, they will have opportunity to meet and listen to the author, Arundhati Roy. Unit 9 in this guide is devoted explicitly to preparing for this visit, and the student conference. Prepare them for a successful conference by encouraging them to challenge themselves with projects that provide critical interpretations of the text in unique and complex ways. There is no limit to the type of project they might prepare. Past projects have included essays, painting, sculpture, weaving, culinary projects, photography, film and other multimedia, dramatic performances, song, dance, and more. The only requirement is that the students' projects must present a critical analysis of the text. Students will be required to write a short summary of their projects which will be due to Heather (greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu) by March 6, 2013.

Each school will select one student (or group of students) whose work is exemplary to present at the **plenary session** on stage. It's recommended that the students themselves select (by voting) the "best" project for this presentation, which will be about 5 minutes in length. It is our expectation that these presentations will be polished, rehearsed and timed, and that they will provide opportunity for your school to feel pride and investment in its participation in the program. All other students are expected to present their work in poster sessions during the conference, and will have opportunity to stand next to their projects and answer questions about them from other students and conference participants. Every student who attends the conference should present his/her work at the conference.

A Note of Caution on Plagiarism

As with other "great" and popular texts, there is a wealth of information readily available on *The God of Small Things*, which can be tempting material to plagiarize from the web or other study guides. Teachers may consider discussing their policies on academic honesty and the differences between paraphrasing, summarizing, citation, and undocumented use of other sources. It is also recommended that teachers make plagiarism less likely by customizing their assignments to their classes and avoiding generic and widely-used prompts for take-home essay assignments and other projects. The more specific a prompt can be—responding to a quote or to another theme or piece of material from the current curriculum—and the more specific evidence from the play required will help to reduce the opportunity for plagiarism.

For Further Information

If you have any questions about this guide, or would like additional information on any of the materials here, please contact Great World Texts coordinator, Heather DuBois Bourenane, at greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu.

Unit 1: Background and Context

The World of Arundhati Roy and *The God of Small Things*

By Sarah Harrison

Objective:

Provide background and context for the study of *The God of Small Things*, and introduce students to the distinctive role of fiction in helping readers to understand actual events and experiences.

Required Preparatory Reading:

- “[Introduction and Overview](#)” by Vinay Dharwadker

Additional Readings and Resources:

- See list of web resources in “Introduction and Overview” by Vinay Dharwadker
- A useful introduction to the history of the Kerala coast: <http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/1.html>

Handouts/Presentation Materials:

- **Maps** (see handouts online at <http://humanities.wisc.edu/public-projects/gwt/2012-2013-project/teaching-resources1/>)
- [What is “Close Reading”?](#)

Lecture Points:

- Using the preparatory materials, the lecture should contextualize the novel by providing a brief history of India, drawing especial attention to key events from the colonial period to the present-day:
 - 1757: The British East India Company establishes its capital at Calcutta.
 - 1857: Indians wage their first “war of independence” against the Company in what was described by colonial historians as the “Great Mutiny.” This conflict results in dissolution of the Company and the British Crown and Parliament taking over direct rule of India.
 - 1885: The Indian National Congress launches a peaceful political movement for independence from Britain, which culminated in the “freedom movement” led by Mahatma Gandhi.
 - 1947: India declares independence, becoming the first British colony to separate from the Crown
- Using the maps provided, locate India and describe its main physical features
- Identify and describe the main settings of the novel (Kerala, Aymanam/Ayemenem, Kottayam, Cochin/Kochi)
- Discuss the people, politics, religions, and languages of present-day India, making reference to any current events that are relevant to your course
- Discuss why context is important to understanding the novel
- Discuss the novel’s blending of fact and fiction, introducing the concept of the “semi-

autobiographical” text

- This is a good moment to address the literary analysis skills you will use in this classroom, e.g. close reading (see handout), thematic analysis. Remind your students that, although there are factual elements in the novel, this is still a work of *fiction* not a documentary.
- Discuss how literature can help us to understand reality by: casting well-known events in a new light; exposing marginalized and/or multiple perspectives; suggesting alternative versions of history; imagining possible future outcomes of present circumstances

Discussion Questions:

- What does “factual” mean? What is an autobiography? What is fiction? What do you expect from fictional writing? Why do you read fiction? What is unique about literature?
 - Invite students to think, for example, about the ways in which literature offers unique opportunities to imagine under-represented or marginalized viewpoints; to personalize large-scale histories and political events; to shed light on how individuals (might have) *felt* about different events.
- Compare contemporary, colonial, and pre-colonial maps of India. Discuss their features.
- Find Aymanam and Kottayam on the map and discuss their features. Do they remind the students of anywhere closer to home?
- Ask any students who have visited India to describe their impressions and experiences.

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- See the **suggested activities** in the [“Introduction and Overview” by Vinay Dharwadker](#).
- Now is a good time to ask your students to keep a **reflection journal** in which they respond to the text and material covered in class. You might ask them to write 1-2 pages of personal response to the text, to find points of identification, or to highlight confusing or problematic passages. Or you could use the discussion questions in these lesson plans to create your own **guided journal** – a handout of prompts to which you require the students to respond when reading the novel. This could be an on-going project, a group activity, or an in-class writing assignment at the end of each class period.
- Ask students to write a short reflective **essay** on the differences between and/or uses of “fact” and “fiction”.

Unit 2: Placing the Text – Indian, English, Postcolonial

By Sarah Harrison

When *The God of Small Things* was first published in 1997, having taken more than four years to write, the novel met with a glowing critical reaction, which Roy has described as “a fabulous circus” (*GST* “Reader’s Guide,” 325). Chief among its plaudits was the 1997 Man Booker Prize for Fiction, a highly prestigious annual literary award given to “the best novel of the year written by a citizen of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland.” This prize offers a useful starting point for thinking about how to “place” *The God of Small Things*, which is at once an Indian novel, an English novel, and a “postcolonial” novel.

While Roy sets her novel in a precisely described Indian location—the town of Ayemenem in which she grew up—she writes in English, a language which was brought to India by British colonists during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Addressing the impact and legacies of the British Raj (“Reign”) is a primary concern of the novel. In this respect, it is characteristic of much of what is called “postcolonial” literature—broadly speaking, writing that came after colonialism formally ended—which commonly seeks to critique the social, cultural, and political impositions of foreign colonialism, often using the colonisers’ language to do so.

Objective:

Explain how the novel can be “placed” within different literary traditions (Indian, English, postcolonial), and provide overview of its critical and commercial reception.

Required Preparatory Reading:

- Biography of Arundhati Roy
http://www.haverford.edu/eng/engl277b/Contexts/Arundhati_Roy.htm
- “[Arundhati Roy and Indian Fiction in English: An Overview](#)” by Aparna Dharwadker
- “A Conversation with Arundhati Roy” (p.325-330 in the Random House trade paperback edition provided to participating teachers)

Additional Readings and Resources:

- “A Silver Thimble in Her Fist,” a book review by Alice Truax
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/25/reviews/970525.25truaxt.html>
- “[The Age of Innocence](#),” a book review by Ritu Menon
- An Indian news article summarizing Marxist leader E M S Namboodiripad’s negative response to the novel: <http://www.rediff.com/news/nov/29roy.htm>
- “The Novel’s Reception” by Julie Mullaney in *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things* (68-76)
- “English in Postcolonial India,” a video examining postcolonial attitudes to the colonizer’s language: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/english-language/postcolonial-english>

- Information on the Man Booker Prize, including a list of past winners:
<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/>

Handouts/Presentation Materials:

- [Notes on Characters](#)
- [Glossary](#)
- [What is Postcolonial Literature?](#)

Lecture Points:

- Provide background information about Roy and *The God of Small Things*, emphasizing the different ways in which this novel can be “placed”
 - *An Indian novel*: Written by an Indian author who now lives in Delhi, set in a real Indian village, featuring allusions to real-life Indian history and politics, *TGST* is in many ways an Indian novel. Roy additionally describes Indian cultural traditions (e.g. Kathakali). This is a good moment to consider how literary works do more than summarizing reality. In representing an imagined version of Indian reality, Roy emphasizes select facets of Indian existence (e.g. the lasting social and psychological influences of British colonialism). This novel might provide us with some insights into Indian culture, but it is not a documentary, as will become increasingly clear in subsequent units, which address its distinctive form and content.
 - *An English novel*: Written in English, featuring allusions to many works of English literature (see handout), and much praised by English literary critics, *TGST* is “English” in several senses.
 - *A Postcolonial novel*: Thinking about *TGST* as a postcolonial novel calls particular attention to the ways in which Roy responds to and critiques the attitudes and practices of British colonialism. To categorize the novel in this way is to emphasize its political intent, which a) asserts the richness of Indian indigenous cultures, b) re-tells Indian history from the perspective of those colonized, and c) restores the connection between Indians and their natural and built environments from which they were alienated during colonialism.
 - *A World novel*: Note that the above “placings” of the novel are not mutually exclusive; *TGST* is all of these at once, and more. Make students aware that Roy is working within and across multiple literary traditions, which enrich her writing in different ways. In this respect, *TGST* is a “world” novel, which has a resonance and a readership beyond its immediate historical, geographical, and linguistic contexts.
- Drawing on the preparatory readings, provide a more detailed overview of Indian fiction in English, and the novel’s relation to this tradition
- Using the handout provided, explain the key characteristics and concerns of postcolonial literature
- Drawing on the suggested reviews of the novel, provide an overview of the critical reaction to and commercial success of *TGST*

- Western reception: Generally positive, as indicated by its Booker Prize Award; critics frequently compare Roy to Salman Rushdie, another internationally bestselling Indian author who writes novels in English
- Indian reception: Mixed with some public figures taking especial offense to Roy's portrayal of sexual intimacy and her critique of Indian political leadership and religion; Sabu Thomas, a Syrian Christian lawyer in her home state of Kerala where the novel is set takes Roy to court on charges of obscenity
- Commercial success: An immediate international bestseller, listed as one of the *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year for 1997
- Set guidelines for how you will read the novel in your class. The novel's intense and varied reception suggests that it is being read in different ways by readers with varied priorities and interpretive biases. What strategies will you use to ensure a careful and fair reading of Roy's work? (e.g. close reading, studying historical background, writing frequent reflections, discussing different reactions in class, etc.)

Discussion Questions:

- *The God of Small Things* will be the first time many of you have read a novel set in India and/or by an Indian writer. What do you already know about India? What are some other ways in which we learn about Indian culture? What does the novel tell us about India? What does it *not* tell us? Is it possible for a literary work to represent an entire nation?
- Why do you think this has been such a popular text that appeals to readers around the world, even 15 years after its first publication? Why do you think that Roy herself has been uneasy about the novel's commercial success?
- Discuss the different ways in which the novel can be "placed." Why does it make a difference if we call this an "Indian," an "English" or a "postcolonial" novel? How else could we describe it? Can it be "placed" elsewhere? What do we gain/lose in our reading of the text by "placing" it in these different ways?
- As a postcolonial text, *The God of Small Things* resists the attitudes and ideas which underpinned British colonization of India. What was the impact of colonialism on India? How did it affect Indians' view of themselves and their own culture?
- How can writing be used as a tool of "resistance"? What makes it effective and/or ineffective?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- After discussing the Booker Prize in class, ask students to imagine that they're on the selection committee for a "Great World Text" award. What criteria would they use to choose a winner? What are the qualities they look for in "great" literature? Can they draw up a shortlist based on their own reading?

Suggestions for expanding this unit:

The British Raj is a formative context for *The God of Small Things*. Explore British colonialism in more depth with your students to give them a historical background for the structures, systems, and stereotypes that Roy is responding to. Read and analyze a selection of Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" to give students a sense of colonial

attitudes towards Indians. How would students feel if they suddenly had to start receiving education in an unfamiliar language?

http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_4/macaulay.htm

Unit 3: Politics and Fiction: The Author as Activist

“The only thing worth globalizing is dissent.” – Arundhati Roy

By Tracy Lemaster

Given that *The God of Small Things* remains Arundhati Roy’s only contribution to literature to date, yet she has published a breadth of nonfiction writing as part of her political advocacy work on social causes, Roy can be considered an activist as much as an author. Roy’s bibliography reads as a nonfiction catalogue of activist interests ranging from the war on terror, to corporate globalization, to environmentalism, to social justice and growing civil unrest. Roy is a dynamic political activist, vocal spokesperson of the anti-globalization movement, and a vehement critic of neo-imperialism and of the global policies of the United States. She mixes her celebrity status with her political advocacy to speak out on social issues and achieve media impact. Her activist writings and actions include concern for both human beings and the environment.

Particular issues Roy has campaigned against include India's nuclear weaponisation, United States military invasion of Afghanistan, the Narmada Dam project, and the Muthanga Wildlife Reserve incident, among many others. She has criticized a variety of violent conflicts including the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, the November 2008 Mumbai attacks, the 2006 Lebanon War, and the 2009 armed actions by the government against the Naxalite-Maoist insurgents in India. Roy’s outspokenness on social causes has received severe criticism from politicians, the media, fellow authors, and even individuals whose groups she campaigned to support.

The God of Small Things’s explicit representation of social protest and implicit engagement with India’s sociopolitical history, in combination with Arundhati Roy’s activist work, suggests that the novel can be read as activist expression.

Objective:

Provide context for *The God of Small Things* within Roy’s overall written and activism background. Examine how to read literature with politics. Introduce readers to the distinctive role of fiction as activism and political expression, and of fiction alongside activism and political expression. Situate the author as an activist with particular sociopolitical leanings and goals, especially with regards to the issue of “globalization.”

Preparatory Reading:

- Biography of Arundhati Roy
http://www.haverford.edu/engl/engl277b/Contexts/Arundhati_Roy.htm
- Complete Bibliography of Arundhati Roy
- Select Bibliography of Arundhati Roy
http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/roy_arundhait.php#biblio
- “Come September” Speech on her reception as an activist
http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/9-11/come_september.htm
- Overview of Arundhati Roy’s activism and controversy therein

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cost_of_Living_\(book\)#Advocacy_and_controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cost_of_Living_(book)#Advocacy_and_controversy)

Additional Readings and Resources:

- Filmic documentary about Roy's political words and causes (suggested teaching tool): [We, Available online.](#)
- *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Roy's essay collection that brings together all of her varied political writings so far.

Handouts/Presentation Materials:

- "What is Global, Local, and Glocal? Understanding Globalization in Arundhati Roy's Activism and Novel"

Lecture Points:

- Provide background information on Roy's other writings and activist work.
 - *Environmentalism*: In Roy's collection *The Cost of Living* (1999), she crusades against India's massive hydroelectric dam projects in the central and western states. Roy donated her Booker prize money and royalties from *The God of Small Things* to the Narmada Dam project, saying that the dam will displace half a million people without compensation, and will not provide the projected irrigation and drinking water benefits. Roy also supported a social movement for adivasi land rights in Kerala, which organised a major land occupation of a piece of land of a former Eucalyptus plantation in the Muthanga Wildlife Reserve.
 - *India's Nuclear Weaponry*: In response to India's testing of nuclear weapons in Rajasthan, Roy wrote *The End of Imagination* (1998), a critique of the Indian government's nuclear policies.
 - *Corporate Globalization*: In an opinion-piece published in *The Hindu*, Roy criticized Anna Hazare and his movement at the height of Hazare's anti-corruption campaign, wherein she questions his secular credentials, points out the campaign's corporate backing, and criticizes Hazare's silence on private-sector corruption and on other critical issues of the day, adding that it "may not be long before Corporate Corruption is made legal and renamed a Lobbying Fee." Also, Roy has criticised the government's armed actions against the Naxalite-Maoist insurgents in India, arguing that the government has "abdicated its responsibility to the people" and launched the offensive against Naxals to aid the corporations with whom it has signed Memorandums of Understanding.
 - *The War on Terror*: In a 2001 opinion piece in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Arundhati Roy responded to the US military invasion of Afghanistan, disputing US claims of being a peaceful and freedom-loving nation, critiquing the argument that this war is a retaliation for the September 11th attacks, and seeing American-style capitalism as the culprit.
 - *Social Advocacy Awards*: In 2002, she won the Lannan Foundation's Cultural Freedom Award for her work "about civil societies that are adversely affected by the world's most powerful governments and corporations." In 2003, she was

awarded 'special recognition' as a Woman of Peace at the Global Exchange Human Rights Awards. In 2004, Roy was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize for her work in social campaigns and her advocacy of non-violence. In January 2006, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, a national award from India's Academy of Letters, for her collection of essays on contemporary issues, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*.

- *Legal Rebukes*: Both Roy's novel and her activism have been the target of severe criticism and lawsuits. For *The God of Small Things*, Roy has been charged with obscenity against Hinduism, slander of a well-known communist leader, betrayal of both region and nation, and pandering to a Western audience for financial success. In 2002, Roy was sentenced to one day's imprisonment and fined Rs. 2500 for her opposition to the Narmada Dam project for which she was criticised as "maligning Gujarat" by the Indian Supreme Court. In 2010, Roy was brought up on charges of sedition by the Delhi Police through a petition filed by Sushil Pandit who alleged that Roy made anti-India speeches at a conference. A Delhi city court directed the police to respond to the demand for a criminal case after the central government declined to charge Roy, saying that the charges were inappropriate. She was also criticised by Indian National Congress for her remarks supporting Kashmiri separatism to which the Congress leader asked Roy withdraw her statements.
- Discuss with students how to read literature with politics; how political context and background creates a "bigger picture" for the fiction that focuses on the "smaller picture" of everyday lives. Ask if all literature has political messages, what do these look like in scenes from literature, and what makes something "political."
- Drawing on the preparatory readings, parallel Roy's activist topics to themes in *The God of Small Things*.
- Ask students why Roy's fiction and nonfiction are considered so controversial, what topics appear to cause rebuke, and whether it has to do with her identity as an author, a celebrity, or a woman.
- Introduce the literal definitions of fiction and nonfiction, then problematize this distinction when reading fiction based on actual events, drawn from real histories, or creatively imagining plausible situations. Introduce the idea that the author is an activist, and that fiction is a form of activism with "real world" impact. Use Roy quote provided below.
- Using the handout provided, introduce the concepts of "global" and "local." Discuss how globalization is an issue in *The God of Small Things*.

Discussion Questions:

- Consider this quote by Roy to ask yourself: What is the difference between fiction and nonfiction? Is fiction a form of activism?
 - "Quite often these days, I find myself being described as a 'social activist.' Those who agree with my views, call me 'courageous.' Those who don't, call me all kinds of rude

names which I won't repeat. I am not a social activist, neither am I particularly courageous. So please do not underestimate the trepidation with which I stand here to say what I must say. Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I'm beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it's actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative - they colonise us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and non-fiction are only different techniques of storytelling."

- Does knowing Arundhati Roy's political concerns and actions limit or expand your reading of *The God of Small Things*? Do you get different readings from *The God of Small Things* when you consider the author's particular topics of political activism? Should we link a novel to its author's outside concerns and identity? Why or why not?
- How can writing be used as a political tool, and have "real world" impact? When is the author an activist?
- Even though *The God of Small Things* focuses on a single family and its local community, the novel notes the global movement of ideas, such as the family's awareness of American tv shows, celebrities, and products. In what ways do you see the "global" within the "local" in *The God of Small Things*? Is the global movement of ideas necessarily good or bad? Do your views of contemporary globalization change (or not) when you consider the historical impact of colonialism on India?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Ask students what they think the main political storyline is in *The God Of Small Things*. Criminal Injustice? Caste Divisions? Gender Inequity? Religious Intolerance? Environmental Causes? Politicians' Dishonesty? Have students construct poster boards that present these various *fictional* storylines as *factual* news headlines. Ask students to think about what literature achieves as a political medium that news reports as a political medium cannot, and vice versa. Challenge students to think about similarities and differences between fiction and nonfiction.
- After discussing the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, ask students to get into two teams to form a mock "debate" on whether *The God of Small Things* is a more a work of "fiction" or "nonfiction" based on issues including: its fabricated characters and storyline, its basis on real Indian history, and its political messages.

Unit 4: Narrative Structure

By Sarah Harrison

The fragmented structure of *The God of Small Things* is one of its most striking and challenging features. In the novel, narrative time does not correspond with chronological time. In other words, the way in which the story unfolds does not follow a conventional route from beginning to middle to end. Instead, Roy employs alternating narrative threads, flashbacks, and flashforwards to tell her story out of sequence in a non-linear fashion. Although this is initially difficult for the reader, understanding why Roy writes in this way can enhance our understanding of key themes in the novel, in particular the lasting effects of trauma and the enduring legacies of historical events. Form and content are thus profoundly interconnected, as Roy herself explains:

[The structure] was the most challenging part of writing the book. It begins at the end and ends in the middle. . . . if it had been a straight, linear narrative, it would have meant something altogether different. Each ordinary moment becomes more heightened, more poignant because it is viewed through the complex lens of both past and present. (*TGST Reader's Guide*, 328-29)

Objective:

To explain and analyze the complex narrative structure of *The God of Small Things*, and to reflect on the relationship between the novel's form and content with particular reference to time as both a structuring principle and central theme.

Preparatory Reading and Resources:

- Benoit, Madhu. "Circular time: A Study of Narrative Techniques in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *World Literature Written in English* 38.1 (1999): 98-106. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449859908589315>

Handouts/Presentation Materials:

- [Novel Chronology](#)

Lecture Points:

- Explain the difference between form (*how* the text is put together, its shape and structure) and content (*what* the text says, the story)
- Identify the different narrative threads that run throughout the novel, which are told out of sequence:
 1. The first storyline unfolds in Ayemenem during a **two-week period in 1969**, when the twins are 7 years old. A series of dramatic and upsetting events occur immediately before, during, and after their cousin Sophie Mol's visit from England: Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man at the cinema; Ammu has a secret and passionate affair with Velutha, the discovery of which results in his death at the hands of the police; Sophie Mol is tragically drowned when she runs away with the twins during the ensuing confusion; Ammu is expelled by her family to eventually die an anonymous death; Estha is sent to live with his father in Calcutta; Rahel remains in the family home.

2. The second storyline takes place over the course of **one day in 1993** when Estha and Rahel meet in Ayemenem for the first time since the tragic events described above. Their reunion culminates in an incestuous sexual encounter.
 3. Both storylines are supplemented by **backstories** which provide information about the central characters and their lives prior to the main events of the novel. These include details of Baby Kochamma's unrequited love for Father Mulligan; the circumstances of Ammu's failed marriage to the twins' father; the story of Chacko's Oxford education and his relationship with Margaret.
- Explain the concept of linear, chronological time (in which events unfold in a ordered sequence, a timeline)
 - Define the formal techniques which Roy uses to disrupt linear time, including:
 - Alternating Narratives
Roy switches between the narrative threads described above, relating events out of order.
 - Flashbacks
e.g. "Twenty-three years later, Rahel, dark woman in a yellow T-shirt turns to Estha in the dark. "Esthapappychachen Kuttapen Peter Mon," she says (Ch. 20, pp. 310: Rahel refers to her adult brother by a playful childhood nickname.)
 - Flashforwards/Foreshadowing
e.g. "She remembers . . . what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man did to Estha in Abhilash Talkies" (Ch. 1, pp. 5: The reader does not yet know what took place at the cinema; this isn't revealed until pp. 98).

[NB. Unit 5 offers more detail about the novel's distinctive style; the focus here is on formal and thematic "time"]

- Discuss the effects that the disruption of linear time has on the novel, which include:
 - *Dramatic*: The flashbacks and flashforwards prepare the reader for the tragic events that are to come, creating suspense, but also helping the reader to get accustomed to the horror that eventually occurs. These repetitions also convey the inevitability of both Velutha and Ammu's affair and it's outcomes.
 - *Political*: Critic Madhu Benoit suggests that the novel's disorderly narration softens the blow of Roy's intense social and political critique. By inviting the reader to put the pieces of the novel jigsaw back together as they read, Roy "blurs the dividing line between author and reader . . . as the reader 'writes' the text" (106). As a result, the reader is more receptive to the painful questions that Roy asks (e.g. about caste prejudice) because they feel more involved in the world of the novel.
 - *Traumatic*: Critic Elizabeth Outka suggests that the fragmented timeline of the novel mimics the psychological effects of Ammu and the twins' trauma. People who experience disturbing, violent, and tragic events are often unable to fully remember them (amnesia) or they are unable to totally forget them (involuntary flashbacks). The kaleidoscopic form of the novel, in which the boundaries between past and present continually merge, imitates the ways in which trauma

sufferers are paradoxically haunted by their past, but also suppress its memory. In this way, the *form* of the novel reflects the *content* of the novel.

- Address the theme of “Frozen Time” in the novel, relating it to the form where possible:
 - *Rahel’s Wristwatch*: This is an important recurrent motif in the novel. A plastic toy watch with “the time painted on it,” the watch defies the passing of time by always reading “ten to two.” Rahel initially wants to “own a watch on which she could change the time whenever she wanted to (which according to her was what Time was meant for in the first place)” (37). This seemingly childish desire also symbolizes one of the larger themes in the novel: the external forces—including time, but also longstanding social norms—which prevent the central characters from taking control of their own lives. When the watch is one of the few items left behind by the police who beat Velutha, the additional meaning of this “faulty record of the time” is underscored (295). The watch marks the trauma which “freezes” Estha and Rahel in time, unable to progress in actual or emotional terms (cf. 222: the adult twins are described as “frozen two-egg fossils”).
 - *Estha’s Silence*: Following the death of Velutha and his mother, Estha gradually stops talking. His silence is compared to “an uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past” (13). He deliberately shuts out the tragedies that affected his family in an attempt to freeze time and pretend they never took place. This is his way of coping with trauma.
 - *Ammu’s Words*: Like her son, Ammu deliberately tries to freeze time in order to deny the disintegration of her family. However, she becomes “garrulous” rather than silent in her attempt. When they meet for the last time before Ammu’s death, she continually interrupts Rahel, “terrified of what adult thing her daughter might say and thaw frozen time” (153).
- Discuss the significance of the History House in the novel, which comes to function as a symbol of the past’s enduring effects in the present:
 - *Metaphor*: Chacko originally uses the History House as a metaphor to convey the alienation of Indians’ from their own past—a result of British colonization, which imposed foreign ideals and distanced Indians from indigenous cultural practices and beliefs (51).
 - *Kari Saipu’s House*: The twins interpret their uncle’s metaphor literally, understanding the History House to be an actual abandoned building in Ayemenem where “the Englishman who had ‘gone native’” once lived, prior to the events of the novel (51). This one-time plantation owner abused a young boy on his property. In her description of this literal History House as a “private Heart of Darkness,” Roy references Joseph Conrad’s novel of the same name, which has been widely understood as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism. When Velutha is murdered in the History House, it takes on additional meaning as a site not only of colonial oppression, but also the repetition of such cruelty in postcolonial India. In contrast to linear time then, the inescapable history encapsulated in the History House conveys the continual and paradoxical presence of the past.

Discussion Questions:

- What effect does the narrative structure have on your reading of the novel? Why do you think that Roy chose to write in this way? Do you find the disruptions of linear time off-putting, confusing, engaging, dramatic?
- The novel does not have a conventional conclusion. The events that are described last in the narrative actually occur earlier in chronological time. As a result they do not offer “closure” for the reader. In other words, things are not neatly tied up at the end. Why do you think Roy chose to end her novel as she does? What is the significance of the final word “tomorrow”? How might the conclusion be read as an attempt to “freeze time”?
 - Of the conclusion, Roy herself says: “[T]he 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).
- How does the form of the novel relate to the theme(s) of the novel? How does the *way* Roy tells her story enhance, clarify or emphasize *what* she is saying?
- What is the role of memory in the novel? How does this affect the form? Why is memory an important theme for Roy? Why does Rahel think of memory as “that woman on the train. Insane in the way she sifted through dark things in a closet and emerged with the most unlikely ones—a fleeting look, a feeling. . . . Quite sane in the way she left huge tracts of darkness veiled. Unremembered” (69-70)? Does this description remind you of any characters in the novel?
- What is the significance Chacko’s “Earth Woman” fable, which he intends to “give Estha and Rahel a sense of Historical Perspective” (52)? Why are the twins unable to find comfort in “geological time” after the tragedies of 1969 (54)?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Before sharing the chronology handout, ask students to create their own timeline of the novel, arranging events in the order in which they occurred.
- Ask students to write their own non-linear story that does not have a conventional beginning, middle, and end.
- Invite students to reflect on some of their strongest memories. Why do you think these have lasted longer than others? What triggers your students’ memories? Are their memories accurate? What effect do they have?

Suggestions for expanding this unit:

Compile a timeline of Indian history with your students, providing both context for the novel and an explanation of linear time. Ask students to research different events on the timeline and present their findings to the class. Discuss the usefulness and limitations of historical timelines, e.g. how they help us keep records of the past, but also highlight certain occasions at the expense of others. Timelines do not describe the enduring effects of “past” events. Can your students think of alternative ways to visually represent history?

Unit 5: Language and Style: Eccentricities of Expression

By Tracy Lemaster

Roy's critical acclaim consistently praises the originality and inventiveness of *The God of Small Things's* language and style. Author John Updike states of *The God of Small Things*: "A novel of real ambition must invent its own language, and this one does." In the context of Roy's nomination for the Booker prize, one critic notes that "[a]lmost alone among the 106 entries Roy has her own voice, her own signature." Similarly, Amar Prasad, in his book on Arundhati Roy, writes, "She has the credit to invent a new style." *The God of Small Things* offers a variety of unconventional formal elements that comprise its critically revered language and style.

Roy repeatedly breaks the standard rules of spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation. She reworks capitalizations, coins neologisms, employs phonetics, imports typographical devices, inserts lists, catalogues, and numerations, and scatters the novel with anagrams, puns, and palindromes. She exchanges syllables between words, reads words backwards, splits them apart, and creates new words in the process. In addition to language experimentation, the novel's narration is in the third person yet fluidly adopts the children's thoughts and images. This shapes a singular narrative voice that is a hybrid combination of the two children's psychologies. Furthermore, within the context of an interconnected extended family, Roy also offers an intergenerational narrative voice of different viewpoints that is transhistorical. Finally, another major stylistic element of *The God of Small Things* is the novel's intertextuality. Roy's novel names and engages classic literature throughout as well as a variety of high and popular cultural intertexts. Roy's experimental language, style, and genre serve many theoretical ends. Her formal elements evoke complex theoretical issues such as Anglophone authorship, cultural hybridity, textual migration, and the child's point-of-view, among others.

Objective: Provide an overview of unique formal elements in genre, style, and language in *The God Of Small Things*, and offer theoretical background for and effects of these eccentric expressions.

Preparatory Reading:

- "English in Postcolonial India," a video examining postcolonial attitudes to the colonizer's language. <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/english-language/postcolonial-english>
- *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Reader's Guide* by Julie Mullaney. New York: Continuum, 2002. An overview guide to the novel including helpful sections synthesizing Roy's stylistic devices.
- *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* by Deepika Bahri. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. An overview guide to aesthetics in postcolonial literature that places Roy's stylistic devices as blurring the binary between the universal and the particular.

Additional Readings and Resources:

- “Radical Aesthetics: Arundhati Roy’s Ecology of Style” by Elisha Cohn. On-line article devoted entirely to Roy’s unconventional style. <http://www.ariel.ucalgary.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/download/4029/3950>
- Two articles on intertextuality in Arundhati Roy; the first using Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the second using E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*.
 - [“Influence and Intertextuality in Arundhati Roy and Harper Lee”](#) by Tracy Lemaster. *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.4 (Winter 2010): 788-814.
 - “Paranoia, Pollution, and Sexuality: Affiliations between E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” by Susan Stanford Friedman. *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

Handouts/Presentation Materials: [“What is Intertextuality?”](#)

Lecture Points:

Genre

- *Anglophone Authorship*: An Anglophone author is an author outside the US writing in English. *TGST*’s unconventional treatment of language represents Roy’s position as an Anglophone author. Roy’s devices for making language strange and those strategies of appropriation show the postcolonial Anglophone writer’s attempts to interrogate and remake the language of the colonizer. Raja Rao notes the difficulty of how the Indian writer “must convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.” Roy’s linguistic devices relay the tension, and paradoxically the creativity, of a hybridized Indian culture influenced by British and American hegemony.
- *Narrative Voice*: *TGST*’s narrator speaks in the third rather than first person. Yet the narrator incorporates thoughts and images attributed to Rahel and Estha. Taking up the children’s mental language, the narrator emphasizes their interaction and playfulness with the world and with language, as well as emphasizes the doubleness of the twins’ shared subjectivity. *The God of Small Things*’ hybrid narrative voice that adopt’s Rahel and Estha’s points-of-view represents the psychological intimacy of the twins. Furthermore, this fluid narrative voice shows how, in Kerala, members of an inter-generational family maintain close ties with their extended family, creating a network of imbricated identities. The novel’s semi-autobiographical family saga represents an intergenerational storyline where the narrator enters and exits different psychologies and histories as portraying an intimately connected familial structure.
- *Child’s Point-of-View*: *TGST* is concerned with authentically representing a child’s point-of-view. Roy’s unconventional spelling, grammar, etc. represents Rahel and Estha’s points-of-view as they learn, question, and satirize the language and happenings of the adult world. The breaking of form and the consistent breaking of sentences and words demonstrate their deconstruction of language, speech, and social discourse.

Style

- *Nonstandard Spelling, Punctuation, and Capitalization*: Rahel and Estha love to speak English forwards, backwards, and in new combinations. The children split words, fracture sentence structures, and subvert linear arrangements, thereby showing their acquisition of and experimentation with language.
 - Examples:
 - “Life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was Forever.”
 - “He dismissed the whole business as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics.”
 - “She enjoyed the WWF *Wrestling Mania* shows, with Hulk Hogan and Mr. Perfect.”
 - “Cuff+link= Cuff-link.”
 - “ehT serutnevda fo eisuS lerriuqS.”
 - “Nictitating
ictitating
titating
itating
tating
ating
ting
ing.”
- *Lists, Catalogues, and Number-Counting*: Roy’s novel is rich with both practical and literary lists. Her listing, cataloguing, and number counting challenge the common perception of simple itemization. Rather, her enumerative form conjures up images of the colonial past where the list-creating impulse plays into colonial rule and politics. Furthermore, her vertical, often hierarchical, lists can evoke the concept of the caste system itself.
 - Examples:

PICKLES	SQUASHES	JAMS
<i>Mango</i>	<i>Orange</i>	<i>Banana</i>
<i>Green pepper</i>	<i>Grape</i>	<i>Mixed fruit</i>
<i>Bitter gourd</i>	<i>Pineapple</i>	<i>Grapefruit marmalade</i>
<i>Garlic</i>	<i>Mango</i>	
<i>Salted lime</i> ”		

 - “(1) *Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes.*
 - (2) *Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings.*
 - (3) *Bright copper kettles.*
 - (4) *Doorbells and sleighbells and scnitzel with noodles.*
 - (5) *Etc.*”
- *Intertextuality*: Intertextuality is a brief or prolonged reference to a literary or cultural “text” within a second text. *TGST* names and engages classic literature throughout including Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar*, Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Sir Walter Scott’s “Lochinvar,” to name a few. Additionally, high and popular cultural intertexts include *The Sound of Music*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Modern Times*, and *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Roy’s intertextuality

illustrates the ways in which literary and cultural texts travel across cultures as implicated in and part of a wider political system of exchange. Through intertextuality, Roy is able to expose and critique American cultural and economic power. She shows a resulting hybridized Indian culture where movement between global powers, like the East and West, result in transformed cultural “texts.”

- Examples:

- “Further inland, and still across, a five-star hotel chain had bought the Heart of Darkness.”

- “It would make them truly sorry, like the grown-ups in Hamelin after the Pied Piper took away all their children.”

- Discuss with students how a novel’s style, as well as its content, conveys arguments. Explore the inseparability between style and storyline.
- Ask students why Roy would choose to be experimental with language, and how her unconventional language is linked to both the author’s identity (as an Anglophone postcolonial author) and her characters’ identities (as children, as members of an interconnected family culture, as under Indian political rule).
- Using the handout provided, introduce the concept of “intertextuality.” Discuss how Roy’s intertextual references engage historical British influence on India, contemporary American influence on India, India’s cultural hybridity, and globalization.

Discussion Questions:

- Did *TGST*’s nonstandard spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation make the text easier or harder to read? Do you feel the novel’s unconventional language and style gave the effect of an authentic child’s “voice”? Of an authentic girl’s experience? Of an intergenerational experience? Of a postcolonial experience? Why or why not?
- Can you name examples of American “intertexts” in the novel? When do you think Rahel and Estha are questioning, enjoying, or resisting an intertext? What examples of intertextuality do you think are political in the novel? How does the way Roy portrays a particular intertext show that she is making a political statement with it?
- Do some of Roy’s unconventional style choices remind you of other forms of communication or expression, such as contemporary digital media’s texting, shorthand, or net lingo?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Ask students to write a journal entry of the events in their day within the style of Roy’s writing.
- Have students choose a complex social topic, term, or phrase—perhaps one they grappled with as a child. Then have them artistically write the language of that topic, term, or phrase in a way that helps explain it. Suggest they adopt some of Rahel and Estha’s experimentation with language to present it, such as exchanging syllables between words, reading words backwards, splitting words apart, and creating new words from old ones.
- After discussing different forms of intertextuality, have students rewrite a classic story in American history using a different cultural intertext.

Unit 6: Love Relationships, Family Influence, and Gender Politics

By Tracy Lemaster

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy foregrounds how private love relationships are actually socially and politically regulated, as stated in her definition of “Love Laws” which “lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.” Reversing the natural uncontrollability of who to love, in what way, and to what extent, results in equally unnatural subversions and occlusions of love relationships. Romantic, sexual, platonic, and familial love relationships in *The God of Small Things* become intermixed, perverted, and destroyed by social politics. These social politics include the novel’s primary foci of caste and religion, as well as politics working “underneath” the surface, such as gender. Importantly in the novel, social politics are often enforced by the family, even to their own detriment, and ultimately expose the reactionary violence of reciprocal state and family “policing” structures. Because the agent for these social politics is the family itself, we can trace these unnatural results through reworkings of love relationships within the family, and implicating the family.

Alongside the explicit influence that caste and religion play in dictating the personal relationships of the characters in *The God of Small Things*, gender is an implicit, though central, context. Gender plays an important role in family and social dynamics that regulate love relationships. Gender is an organizing social structure that dictates power relations within individuals’ private lives.

Objective: To examine how the family and state reciprocate the enforcement of social politics about love, and how love relationships can be subverted under these pressures. To focus on the category of gender as an integral element in the various intersections of family, “love,” and sex.

Lecture Points:

The central “love” relationship that disrupts social politics in *TGST* is the sexual and romantic attraction between an Untouchable toward an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman. This affair disrupts social politics about inter-caste and cross-religious mixing. This affair threatens these systems’ prominence in post-Independence India. To intervene, the communal family operates as agents of the state who manipulate real and contrived violence into political code. Ammu’s mother, Mammachi, learns of Ammu’s affair with Velutha from Velutha’s father. Baby Kochamma, the grand-aunt, rushes to the police station with a false rape charge that she legitimates by making Ammu’s children, Rahel and Estha, lie to the police. After strategic familial attempts to reestablish order, Ammu’s brother separates Ammu from Estha and banishes her, thus causing Ammu to die alone in poverty a few years later. Multiple love relationships are intermixed, perverted, and destroyed in the process of reinforcing “Love Laws.”

- *Romantic/Sexual Love:* Romantic love, sexual love, and desire are normally categories that seem distinct from familial love. Familial love relationships, including parent-to-child and sibling-to-sibling, lack a sexual component because they are platonic. However, when the family acts as agents of the state for enforcing social politics, these demarcations become intermingled.
 - The family regulates Ammu’s sexuality and sexual relations with Velutha.
 - Estha and Rahel ultimately have an incestuous encounter.

- *Familial Love*: Love relationships between family members, traditionally based on care, support, and protection, can break down. In addition to the breaking down of familial love relationships, the family can literally divide.
 - Ammu and Baby Kochamma make Rahel and Estha lie to the police, a lie that damages the children emotionally and psychologically.
 - Ammu's brother separates Ammu from Estha then banishes her, thus causing Ammu to die alone in poverty a few years later.
- *Future Love*: Roy shows how the destruction and subversion of current love relationships can thwart future love relationships.
 - Estha never marries and lives socially isolated.
 - Rahel never leaves home and feels a permanent emptiness that thwarts her one marriage.

The family privately polices religious and caste politics, shaping personal love relationships through political code. Operating within the more transparent politics of caste and religion is gender politics.

- *Gender Politics*: The parents contrive rape accusations to conceal and deny the woman's taboo sexual attraction to the socially subjugated male. Such an attraction from a woman to a man of a lesser social strata threatens a stable definition of citizen and the circumscribed parameters of women's political and sexual power. The regulation of women's sexualities catalyzes the novel's plots and receives equal judgment by the family and society. The family polices Ammu's sexuality by reintegrating her transgressions into a criminal charge that can only be executed through the family's internal violence. Thus, the woman's plotline privatizes legal violence not simply through a false rape trial, but through the family's operations as agents of the state.
 - After a period of berating Velutha, Ammu focuses her disgust on her daughter, redirecting sexual blame onto the woman.
 - The parents' focus on the women's sexual desire as point of contestation demonizes women's sexuality and validates their physical and familial punishment.

Discussion Questions:

- Analyze the phrase "love laws." Does Roy's rhyming pair of words seem inherently contradictory in meaning? Why would Roy use the term "law"? Can social issues be policed by individuals? Does the family police "love" relationships as much as or more than actual law enforcement? Does the novel show that regulating who to love is ultimately successful? What are the unwritten "love laws" in *TGST*?
- How does the termination of Ammu and Velutha's love relationship affect other love relationships in the novel? Give some examples of the overlapping or intermixing of family/platonic love relationships and romantic/sexual love relationships.
- Consider the proximity of the community, the family, and the individual in following quote where Mammachi imagines Ammu and Velutha's affair: "She had defiled generations of breeding . . . and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, *forever* now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They'd nudge and whisper.

It was all finished now.” Why does the family feel their social reputation will be effected by Ammu and Velutha’s affair? How does the structure of communal family support their intercession in each other’s private lives? How does an individual’s “love” choice implicate the family, which therefore implicates the community? Is there any separation between public and private?

- Why does Mammachi dismiss her son’s sexual liaisons as “Men’s Needs,” but she does not tolerate her daughter’s love affair? How does gender, or the “double standard,” operate in the family’s response to Ammu’s affair with Velutha? Is the destabilization of caste and religious mores the only reasons for their rejection of this love relationship, or is gender a factor? Is caste and gender even the primary reasons?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Have students draw a chart of the various “love” relationships in the novel, and how each is reshaped during and after the termination of Ammu and Velutha’s affair. How are traditional paradigms of family love and romantic love reshaped by the trauma of Velutha’s death and Ammu’s persecution?
- Close read some of the novel’s key scenes looking for how gender politics are working. Then consider how gender *intersects* with other social structures that dictate power relations within individuals’ lives, such as caste and religion.

Suggestions for Expanding this Unit:

- Students can further interrogate how gender works in the context of *TGST* by looking at how critical reception of Arundhati Roy as an author contained elements of gender politics. For example, critics often focused on describing her “attractive” appearance, and attributed her talents to influence by male authors, even though she only cites a few female authors as influences. How are some of the novel’s gender politics regarding women’s power, choices, sexuality, social status, and appearance, rearticulated through Roy’s reception as a novelist?

Unit 7: Political and Social Structures – Communism, Caste, Religion

By Sarah Harrison

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy repeatedly demonstrates that “the personal is political.” Her characters’ public lives and private lives are mediated by intersecting social, political, and religious structures that profoundly affect their behavior within and outside their homes, their relationships to other people, the jobs they perform, and their perceptions of the world.

Critics such as Aijaz Ahmad have argued that Roy’s portrayal of the Communist Party of India is “spiteful.” However, her depiction of the Syrian Christian community to which the Ipe family belongs is also highly critical of their assumed social superiority. Similarly, Roman Catholicism does not escape satire, as we see in Roy’s tragicomic depiction of Baby Kochamma’s unrequited passion for Father Mulligan (23-26; 280-83). Although Velutha is portrayed with considerable sympathy by Roy, she does not idealize “Untouchables” in the novel. Velutha’s own father, for example, finds it impossible to deny the social hierarchy in which he has grown up, betraying his own son when his illicit relationship with Ammu is discovered (242).

In teaching students about these “big things” which affect the “small things” in the characters’ lives, it is important to emphasize the complex relationships *between* these formative contexts. Communism, caste, or religion alone cannot explain how and why her characters act. Over time, these structures and beliefs have changed, overlapped, and reinforced one another.

Objective: Provide students with an overview of the overlapping social, political, and religious contexts for *The God of Small Things*, drawing attention to the ways in which these structures both reinforce and contradict one another.

Preparatory Reading:

- “[Introduction and Overview](#)” by Vinay Dharwadker
- “Untouchables in *The God of Small Things*”: <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/roy/alum1.html>

Additional Readings and Resources:

- “Caste and *The God of Small Things*”: <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/caste.html>
- An introduction to the caste system from the Asian Human Rights Commission: <http://www.hrschool.org/doc/mainfile.php/lesson65/230/>
- A very readable guide to the social, political, and religious structures that Roy writes about: “[Cultural Contexts](#)” in *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things* by Alex Tickell. [Routledge: London & New York, 2007: 19-32.](#)

Handouts/Presentation Materials:

- “[The Caste System in India](#)”

Lecture Points:

- Using the materials above, provide an overview of the intersecting social and political structures which Roy critiques in *TGST*:
 - *The Caste System*: A traditional Hindu form of social organization which divides people into hierarchical groups. The caste someone is born into determines what occupation they perform, the kind of education they receive (if any), how they might dress, what they eat, and how they interact with others. Velutha belongs to a large group of “outcasts” known as “Untouchables” who are deemed “impure” through their occupational contact with filth, dirt, bodily fluids, etc. Outlawed in the 1950 Constitution, caste prejudice still lingers in modern-day India (cf. handout).
 - *Syrian Christians*: The Ipe family belong to this group, who trace their origins to the “high caste” Hindus believed to have been converted by St. Thomas the Apostle early in the 1st century AD when he is said to have visited Kerala. They are one of India’s smallest religious minorities. Although Christian, they follow many Hindu social customs. They are affluent and highly educated, asserting a high social status based on their claimed “upper-caste” Brahmin ancestry.
 - *Communism*: The Communist Party of India (CPI) formed in 1920 as the political party of the Indian working class. In the 1950s and 1960s, two distinct “factions,” called the Communist Party (Marxist) [the CP(M)] and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) [the CP(ML)] broke away from the older CPI. Much of *TGST* is set in 1969 when the CP(M) led by E.M.S. Namboodripad were dominant in Kerala. This faction advocated a “peaceful transition” to socialism. In contrast, the influence of the Naxalites, a much more radical wing of the opposing CP(ML), was also beginning to be felt in Kerala at this time. As the narrator says when the Ipe family are en route to the cinema in Cochin and their car is surrounded by protesting workers: “There was an edge to [the marchers’] anger that was Naxalite, and new” (*TGST* 67).
- Highlight the ways in which these structures reinforce and contradict one another in the novel:
 - Despite being Christians, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma adhere to notions of social hierarchy which derive from the Hindu caste system.
 - Note the irony of Chacko’s professed communism: he is the relatively wealthy business-owner of Paradise Pickles and Preserves, but he claims sympathy with the demands of his own workers for better pay and conditions. Although he considers Comrade Pillai to be precisely that—a *comrade*—this feeling is not fully reciprocated as we see when Chacko visits Pillai at home (259-67).
 - Note also the prejudices exhibited by the communists in the novel against “untouchables” such as Velutha (*TGST* 115, 263); their resentment contradicts the Party’s stated aims of social justice for *all* Indians.
- Discuss the ways in which social structures are subverted in the novel:
 - Ammu and Velutha’s relationship
 - Rahel and Estha’s relationship

Discussion Questions:

- How does the caste system affect the characters in Roy’s novel? What does Roy’s characterization of Velutha and his father suggest about her attitude to the caste system? What

are the possible benefits and drawbacks of this kind of social organization? What kinds of things organize American society and how have these changed over time?

- Why is Ammu and Velutha's relationship considered to be so outrageous? Why do you think this kind of intimate interaction between members of different castes is seen as dangerous by characters such as Mammachi and Baby Kochamma? What are the other ways in which social structures are subverted in the novel?
- How does Roy characterize communists, such as Comrade Pillai and Chacko (cf. *TGST* 63-63; 113-16)? Why does Ammu call Chacko's communism "hogwash" (*TGST* 63)? What is the nature of the relationship between Comrade Pillai and Chacko? (See especially Ch. 14 "Work is Struggle".) Why does Comrade Pillai deny Velutha help when he seeks the Party's support after the discovery of his relationship with Ammu (*TGST* 248, 271)?
- How does Roy characterize the Syrian Christian community through her portrayal of Mammachi in particular? Why does Baby Kochamma convert to Roman Catholicism?
- How do the "big things" in the novel (e.g. religion, caste, politics) affect "small things" (e.g. romance, daily life, family dynamics)? Do the "small things" affect the "big things" in any way? Who is "the God of Small Things"?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Ask students to reflect on the "big things" which affect the "small things" in their own lives.
- Stage a debate about why Velutha died. Ask individual or small groups of students to assume the role of different "key witnesses" from the novel: the twins; Chacko; Baby Kochamma; Mammachi; Ammu; Comrade Pillai; the factory workers; Inspector Thomas Mathew, etc. Give each of them time to write down and present (in character) the reasons why they believe Velutha died. (Ask them to reflect not only on his actual murder, but also the events building up to it.) You can serve as a "cross-examiner," prompting them to expand on and/or defend their answers.

Suggestions for expanding this unit:

The caste system can seem strange and outdated to students first learning about it, so it is important to invite reflection on why it has been and still is so significant for many Indians. Invite them to conduct further research into this social system by watching excerpts from the recent documentary *India Untouched*, available in 10-minute segments on

YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_UnVZT0-0k

and in full: <http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/5752/India-Untouched---Stories-of-a-People-Apart->

Unit 8: Environment

By Sarah Harrison

As we have seen in Unit 3, Arundhati Roy's non-fiction writing explicitly engages environmental issues. However, *The God of Small Things* is equally concerned with exploring the effects of uneven development, resource extraction, environmental pollution, and different definitions of "nature" on the physical world. Although critics have primarily focused on Roy's distinctive style and innovative form, these aspects of her novel are inseparable from its critique of India's intertwined histories of human and environmental degradation. Not only does the novel highlight the damaging effects of colonization on the Indian environment, but it also draws attention to the ways in which Indian authorities and businesses continue to exploit natural "resources."

Objective: To identify and evaluate the different environmental attitudes depicted in *The God of Small Things*, highlighting the inseparability of "nature" from "culture."

Preparatory Readings and Resources:

- An interview with Roy that focuses on her environmentalism: <http://www.paulkingsnorth.net/journalism/i-wish-i-had-the-guts-to-shut-up/>
- A collection of images of the Meenachal River in Kerala: <http://www.panoramio.com/user/2897155/tags/meenachil%20river>

Lecture Points:

- *Environmental Colonization:* As Roy shows through the examples listed below, colonial approaches to mapping, classifying, and farming the Indian landscape express an exploitative attitude to the non-human world, which pays scant regard to ecological sustainability or the interdependence of humans and their physical surroundings.
 - As an Imperial Entomologist (TGST 47-48), Pappachi was an instrument in the colonial machine that alienated Indians from their own culture and environment. The study and classification of insects is invoked by Roy as an example of the ways in which colonizers wanted to systematically know and define the territories they moved into. Just as they "wrote history," they also produced definitions of the Indian environment, making it understood on *their* terms.
 - Baby Kochamma's ornamental garden, cultivated through botanical knowledge acquired at the University of Rochester, demonstrates the extension of colonial attempts to control and tame the Indian environment (26-27). Her antagonistic relationship to the natural world provides a stark contrast to that of the twins and Velutha (discussed below).
 - India's plantation history is an important context for the novel. This form of intensive farming not only exploits and degrades the land, but also the low-paid workers employed to plant and harvest the crops. The History House is built on

an abandoned rubber estate (51) and Ammu's ex-husband (the twins' father) is the assistant manager of a tea estate (39-42).

- *Uneven Development*: If colonialism exploited the Indian landscape by exporting plantation crops for European profit, Roy's depiction of the tourist industry in postcolonial Kerala suggests the perpetuation of this uneven relationship between India and the "West," which continues to take its toll on the environment. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem as an adult, she observes how the History House has been transformed into the Heritage Hotel, a luxury destination for foreign visitors (119-21). Despite the renovations, the stench of the nearby river, which has turned toxic as a result of over-farming and industrial pollution, cannot be disguised (cf. 14). This juxtaposition highlights the continuity between the History House's inescapable sordid past, and the ill-advised efforts of "those clever Hotel People" to "discipline" nature in the manner of their colonial predecessors (120). Roy critiques this exploitative attitude that degrades both the natural environment and the Keralans who live and work there.
- *River-sense*: Unlike the "Hotel People," Velutha exhibits an affinity with his surroundings—a "river-sense" (30) which he passes on to the twins; for example, by teaching them how to fish (75). The home he shares with his father and paralyzed brother—"a low hut . . . nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret" (195)—expresses this sensitivity to the natural world. Roy does not idealize Velutha's apparent closeness to nature, however. Although his deep connection to the Meenachal River is a key element of what attracts Ammu to him (315-17), he and his family live where they do because they are socially marginalized. The river is a source of income and solace for Velutha and his family, but it is also dangerous and unpredictable as the twins tragically learn (194; 275-78). Velutha's "river-sense" is, in part, an awareness of this unpredictability (245), which provides an instructive contrast with the colonial and neo-colonial insistence on defining and controlling the environment exemplified by "imperial entomology" and the Heritage Hotel.

Discussion Questions:

- Close read the four opening paragraphs of the novel in class (from "May in Ayemenem . . ." to "A drenched mongoose . . ." [3-4]). How and why does Roy establish environmental awareness from the very beginning of her novel? What impression does she give of the Kerala landscape? Is there anything striking or unusual about her descriptions of the weather and wildlife? What expectations does this introduction establish for the rest of the novel?
- What does the Meenacahal River symbolize in the novel? Why do you think Roy chose to make Sophie Mol's drowning the central event of the novel? How does this tragedy relate to Roy's environmental views?
- Both the History House and the tea estate are sites of sexual aggression. An Englishman rapes a boy in the former (51), and Ammu is propositioned by her husband's employer at the latter (41). Why does Roy invite a connection between plantation agriculture and the sexual exploitation of women and/or children? How are colonial attitudes to the environment related to these forms of sexual aggression?
- How does the novel show that human and environmental histories are inseparable? How do cultural beliefs and/or social practices impact the environment? How have these changed and/or not changed over time?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Literary Entomology: Ask students to describe and define one of the insects that appears and/or reappears in the novel, such as the “minute spider” that takes on special significance for Velutha & Ammu (320), or the millipede on the sole of the policemen’s boots that kick Velutha almost to death. How do these “small things” help us to understand the “big things” that the novel is about?
- Tourism: Examine the politics of contemporary tourism in more detail with your class. What are their experiences of being tourists? Who does tourism benefit? What are its drawbacks? Invite them to research tourism in Kerala online. Analyze the language and images used in materials such as those listed below. You might ask students to write their own brochure for the Heritage Hotel. You could pair these texts with excerpts from Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid’s short, but scathing account of Caribbean tourism, *A Small Place* (1988).
 - A review of rubber plantation guesthouses: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2011/oct/28/kerala-homestays-rubber-plantations-kochi>
 - <http://www.keralatourism.com/>
 - <http://www.kerala.com/keralatourism/>

Suggestions for expanding this unit:

A good way to expand this lesson would be to further explore Roy’s environmental activism, using the additional resources listed above and in Unit 3. As explained in the latter, she is a well-known opponent of the Narmada Dam Project, which she critiques in her essay “The Greater Common Good,” available online: <http://www.narmada.org/gcg/gcg.html>

The following quotation from the closing paragraph of this essay is an especially useful discussion prompt; the “intelligence” that Roy describes might usefully be compared to Vekutha’s “river-sense”:

Big Dams are to a Nation's "Development" what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They're both weapons of mass destruction. They're both weapons Governments use to control their own people. Both Twentieth Century emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They're both malignant indications of civilization turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link - the understanding - between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence.

Unit 9: Engaged Readings

Meeting the Author & Preparing for the Spring Student Conference

By Heather DuBois Bourenane

For the first time ever, the Great World Texts program has the opportunity to welcome the author of the current text to the Spring Student Conference, and students from all over the state will have the rare opportunity to interact with the author of the novel they've been studying. This interaction will be the heart of the Spring Student Conference, and our keynote presentation will consist of A Conversation with Arundhati Roy, during which students will ask questions of the author.



Meeting the author is a amazing, exciting event, but also one that brings special considerations to how we approach the text and our projects. How do students act around the author? What kinds of questions should they ask? How can they best prepare for this meeting? What should teachers do if students are disruptive or rude?

Objective: Prepare students to make the most of the Spring Student Conference through active, engagement with the author; and to provide tips to build confidence, address concerns, and set expectations for decorum and behavior during the conference.

Preparatory Materials:

- Preparing for the Great World Texts Spring Student Conference
- Guidelines for Student Conference Presentations
- Presentation Proposal form
- Presentation Summary form (due by March 6, 2013)

Additional Readings and Resources:

- **“The Short Story #8: Meeting the Author”** youtube clip (starts at 2:30) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY9IH61bpyY> Fun clip to show students and break ice about issues they might be concerned about
- **“The Perfect Author Visit”** by Dane Gutman. Some great tips for preparing students and making sure author visits go well. <http://www.dangutman.com/pages/planvisits.html>
- **“How to talk to writers”** by Jo Walton <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2008/12/how-to-talk-to-writers>
- **“How to talk to a writer”** by Suzanne Roberts. <http://the-how-to.tumblr.com/post/32877145596/how-to-talk-to-a-writer>
- **CCBC’s tips for meeting an author:** <http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/authors/tips.asp>

Handouts/Presentation Materials for Students:

- Meeting Roy: How to Talk to a Writer
- Guidelines for Presentations
- Presentation Proposal form
- Presentation Summary form (due by March 6, 2013)

Lecture Points:

- **Prepare your students for meeting Arundhati Roy the *person*.** Emphasize that, like all people, she could be nervous, excited, happy, sad, shy, in a good or bad mood, etc. Show clips of her doing interviews (The “Invitation to World Literature” piece is a good place to start) and show the class her photograph so they can think of her as an individual from the start.
- **Emphasize being courteous and respectful:**
 - Always greet the author, thank him/her for coming, and introduce yourself before jumping into your question.
 - Use polite language
 - Try to make eye contact and be conscious of body language
 - Avoid overly criticizing parts of the book you didn’t like or saying you “hated” the book
 - Thank the author for his/her time (and for writing the book if you enjoyed it!)
- **Help students avoid anxiety and feeling nervous:**
 - Focus on the experience, not the “performance” or “act” of talking to the author
 - Take a deep breath. It’s ok to be nervous, but the author is just another person – he or she came all the way to Wisconsin just to talk to *us*, which might make you feel nervous, but it should also make you feel confident that she thinks you have something to say that is worth hearing.
 - This is a chance for **dialogue**. *Dialogue means both voices matter*. The author wants to hear from you as much as you want to hear from the author. Sharing your ideas and reactions to her book will make it easy to start a conversation. Thinking about our interactions with the author as a chance for conversation takes the pressure off our own performance and lets us focus on the chance to learn.
- **Encourage them to be SPECIFIC:**
 - Don’t just say “I love this book!” Say what you loved most about it. What inspired you? What made you think? What challenged you?
 - Avoid yes or no questions (*Was it hard to write this book?*) and ask questions that allow room for thought and interpretation (*What was the biggest challenge you faced when writing this book?*).
 - Consider the “lead in” to your question. Give a little context to let the author know where you’re coming from. For example, “Why did you choose [x]?” would be a much more interesting question if the speaker first explained WHY [x] is interesting or confusing to him/her. “I loved this character, but was confused by some of his choices, such as [give example]. Why did you choose to have him do [this or that]?”
- **Be prepared:**

- Think about how the author might react to your questions. Role-play possible answers.
- Prepare a list of possible follow-up questions if she does/doesn't answer a certain way.
- **Know the consequences.** This conference is a serious academic affair and a lot of planning has gone into this event by teachers, students, and UW staff. The people in attendance have all traveled far and spent weeks and months preparing and getting excited for the conference. Being disruptive, discourteous, or disrespectful to the speakers or your peers during the conference is unacceptable, and teachers whose students do not follow the decorum guidelines will be expected to remove students immediately from the room.

Discussion Questions:

- How would you like to be treated (or not treated) if you were the author?
- What questions do you most want answered? What do you want to know about the author that the book can't tell you?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- **Role play: Meeting the Author.** Have students prepare questions for various authors and practice asking and answering them. What questions got the best (or worst) answers? Why?
- **Brainstorm: productive questions.** Ask students to get in groups and write down every single question they can think of to ask the author. Then switch questions with other groups and discuss the questions, then select the best ones. Did any groups have the same questions? How do we decide what "good" and "bad" questions are? Hint: "bad" questions are ones that are too easy to answer, very obvious, or could be easily answered by anyone who read the book.
- **Research the author.** Students can get excited about the author's visit by doing research into her life, background, hometown, and body of work. Learning more about who Roy is, why she's famous, what makes her interesting to others, will get students excited to meet her and inspire interesting questions.
- **Writing exercise:** ask students to write, and revise their questions independently and in groups. Have them work together until they feel the question is worded perfectly so that it is clear, direct, and interesting to both the author and the audience.

Suggestions for expanding this unit:

- Apply the author visit guidelines above to other author visits or assemblies the students have attended or will attend. Have them compare or assess how "well" that speaker was received, and why.

TEACHING *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* IN WISCONSIN:

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTS

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Vinay Dharwadker

Kerala and India are woven into the fabric of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The novel assumes that its reader is familiar with many basic facts about these two places, especially their history and geography, society and culture, economy and politics.

Roy grew up in Kerala, where her mother's family had a home in the village of Aymanam, located on the outskirts of the town of Kottayam, on the other side of the River Minachil. Most of the action of *The God of Small Things* takes place in a village called "Ayemenem," set near a river called "Meenachal." Roy's fictionalized village and river strongly resemble the real-life Aymanam and Minachil, and her narrative contains numerous references to the actual landscape of south-central Kerala, its people and their common customs, their music and dance, their religions and social organization, and their economic and political activities.

The narrative also mixes its fictional elements with factual elements on a larger scale. Some of the novel's "imaginary" episodes occur in the real town of Kottayam (about 2 miles from Ayemenem/ Aymanam, across the river) and in the historic port-city of Cochin (now Kochi, about 50 miles away to the northwest). The novel's political discussion frequently blends fictional characters and organizations with real politicians and political parties: Comrade Pillai, for example, is an invented figure, but E.M.S. Namboodripad, the Communist Party, and the Congress Party are historical entities.

The mixture of fictional and factual elements in *The God of Small Things* has led many Indian readers to interpret it as a "semi-autobiographical" novel. But attempts to relate characters, places, events, and patterns in the book primarily to Roy's personal life can seriously distort its message, and detract from its value. For readers around the world—and in Wisconsin—*The God of Small Things* is most valuable and meaningful as a *novel*, an imaginative human story told in well-crafted prose, using a combination of fact and fiction.

In this section of the Guide, we focus on the factual dimension of Roy's text. Some basic facts about India, Kerala, and Aymanam/Ayemenem provide an orientation for the reader of *The God of Small Things*. We have used these three places to define a larger conceptual framework for information about location, landscape, natural environment, economic resources and activities, people, language, society, religion and ways of life, marriage and family, food and attire, music and dance, politics, local customs, and history. For ease of reference, we have organized and presented the information by theme or topic (under "Overviews" and "Specific Topics"). For most of the specific topics, we have mentioned some teaching strategies for home and class activities, as well as some Web resources for consultation and exploration.

I. OVERVIEWS

1. INDIA

India (the Republic of India) became a modern nation on August 15, 1947, when it achieved independence from British rule. It is the world's largest democracy, with a current population of about 1.2 billion. It is located in the southern portion of Asia, and is part of a cluster of nations often called "South Asia," which consists of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives (with Afghanistan sometimes added to the list). Before 1947, this entire region was usually called "India" or "the Indian subcontinent." The capital of today's India is New Delhi, which is the most modern part of the larger and much older city of Delhi.

1.1. Political Organization

India is divided at present into 28 states and 7 Union Territories, Kerala being one of the states. India is a constitutional republic with a British-style parliamentary democracy; the national legislature is the Parliament of India, in New Delhi. India has a *multi-party* political system, with dozens of large national and regional political parties, which participate in elections at the national, state, and local levels. The national government (called the Central Government) and the state governments operate in a loosely federal system of administration.

When different political parties are elected to office at the state and national levels in India, a state government may have very different policies and a different style of administration from the national government. (This is the case in most of Roy's novel, in which the Congress Party controls the national government while the Communist Party holds power in Kerala.)

1.2. Religious Divisions

Viewed as a whole, Indian society is, and for many centuries has been, the most multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious society in the world. Modern India defines itself as a secular nation, and its constitution protects numerous religious, ethnic, racial, and social groups or minorities, including Dalits (former "untouchables") and aboriginals. The major religions originating in and/or practiced in India are:

Hinduism, which arose around 1200 B.C., now followed by 82% of Indians;

Islam, which arrived in Indian the 8th century, now 13%;

Christianity, which first arrived in the 1st century, now about 2.5%;

Sikhism, which arose in the 16th century, now almost 2%;

Jainism and *Buddhism*, which arose around 600-550 B.C., now less than 1% each;

Judaism (early A.D.) and *Zoroastrianism* (by 11th century), now less than 100,000 each.

Since the total population exceeds 1.2 billion, even small percentages involve large numbers: there are about 23 million Sikhs in India, and 29 million Christians of various denominations.

While most of these religions appear in communities spread all over India and South Asia, the way of life associated with each them undergoes significant regional variation. Thus,

Muslims in Bengal have very different local customs from those of, say, the Mopilla or Moplah Muslims of Kerala; moreover, Muslims in West Bengal and Bangladesh speak Bengali, whereas Moplah Muslims speak Malayalam. Likewise, the Roman Catholics of Goa organize themselves quite differently from the Syrian Christians of Kerala—and even their use of English is different.

1.3. Multilingualism

The scale of India's multilingualism is one of its unique features. The Indian population as a whole uses about 3,000 dialects or well-defined speech varieties in everyday life; the majority of these have only a spoken form. These dialects can be grouped into about 125 distinct *languages*, which have spoken as well as written forms. Like their European counterparts (such as French, Spanish, German, Dutch, etc.), these languages are mutually incomprehensible.

About two dozen of the Indian languages are major languages, each with millions or tens of millions of native users, and each with written and oral traditions going back several centuries or longer. The Indian constitution recognizes 22 languages, and identifies Hindi and English as the republic's two "official" languages, each serving as a *lingua franca* or a "link language" for national administrative purposes. The national education policy requires a high-school student to be literate in at least three languages (not just "dialects").

The real complexity of Indian multilingualism, however, lies in the fact that it uses at least 12 different script-systems: thus, for example, English is written in the Roman script, Hindi is written in the Devanagari script, and Malayalam is written in the Malayalam script. Although some scripts (such as Devanagari) are used to write more than one language, Indians who are literate in several languages usually learn and use their distinctive scripts.

1.4. Social Divisions

Modern Indian society is often divided in several overlapping ways: by language and ethnicity, regional origin, religion, socio-economic class, etc.

Since Hindus constitute a large majority (about 82% of the population) spread all over the country, the traditional Hindu division of society into castes (*jatis*) and caste-groups (*varnas*) is still a fact of national life, even while being modified by contemporary economic and cultural conditions. Although Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism are egalitarian religions in principle, versions of caste division appear among Sikhs and Indian Muslims and Christians also, for complex historical reasons.

The four caste-groups are: Brahmins (priests, scholars); Kshatriyas (warriors, kings); Vaishyas (merchants, traders, bankers, etc.); and Shudras (servants, peasants, laborers). The four caste-groups coexist with a fifth large category: the Asprishya or "untouchables" (garbage-removers, cremators, barbers, tanners and cobblers, etc.), who are believed to be permanently "polluted" by their occupations and their association with dead and rotting things, with filth, etc. The Indian constitution, adopted in 1950, outlawed all discrimination against "untouchables"; in recent decades, numerous former "untouchables" have attempted to overcome stigma and

discrimination by reorganizing themselves as “Dalits” (the “oppressed”), often by converting from Hinduism to Buddhism.

In traditional Hindu society, each of the four caste-groups, like the category of “untouchables” also, consists of hundreds of specific castes or *jatis* and specific lineages. Thus, for example, there are dozens of distinct groupings of Brahmins (by place of origin, priestly function, scholarly status, etc.), and hundreds of regional and local *jatis* of peasants. The four caste-groups and the category of “untouchables” contain a total of nearly 3,000 specific castes across India. [**Note:** The fact that the number of specific castes in Hinduism is roughly the same as the number of dialects or speech varieties used in India is purely accidental.]

This enormous system of castes and caste-groups is traditionally maintained by arranged and endogamous marriage, definition of caste-membership by birth, restrictions on food and commensality, life-cycle rituals, rules about “pollution” (including “touchability” and its opposite), limitations on occupation, livelihood, and social mobility, etc. [For further discussion of caste, see the reference article by Joseph Elder included in this Guide.]

In modern times, traditional ideas of social organization are modified by the life-patterns of socioeconomic classes and by conditions of labor, professionalization, and urbanization. As a consequence, the characteristics of any social group in modern India can also be analyzed according to the principles of socioeconomic *class*. We can thus talk about the division of Indian society into a peasantry (farmers), a working class (urban labor), a middle class (modern professionals and managers, predominantly urban), and an upper or ruling class (land-owners, capitalists, and the political elite).

Among India’s many aboriginal communities, especially those that do not have an indigenous concept of “property” or “private property,” social life is organized along completely different lines.

1.5. Historical Periods

Indian history is often divided into several broad periods, as follows.

(1) The *ancient period*, from about 1200 B.C. to about A.D. 100, which includes the birth of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism;

(2) the *classical period*, from about A.D. 100 to 1200, marking an ascendancy of Hindu civilization;

(3) the *middle period*, from about 1200 to 1757, during which Muslim conquerors and settlers (mostly from Persia, Turkey and Central Asia, and Arabia) and their descendents governed large parts of the Indian subcontinent;

(4) the *colonial period*, from 1757 to 1947, when the subcontinent was part of the British empire; and

(5) the *postcolonial period*, from 1947 onward, when the subcontinent was partitioned into several new nations, now including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

After 1526, in the middle period, the Mughal dynasty established its dominance over most of the Indian subcontinent, ruling from Delhi and Agra (home of the Taj Mahal). Europe's interactions began earlier, in 1498, when the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama discovered the sea-route from the Atlantic to India, traveling around Africa and across the Indian Ocean. Da Gama—a competitor of Christopher Columbus—completed his first journey when he arrived in the port of Cochin, in Kerala, in order to start a trade in spices (pepper, cinnamon), textiles, and handicrafts. Thereafter, the Portuguese conquered and settled in Goa, the first European colony in India. (The very first page of Roy's novel contains several general references to the importance of Kerala and Cochin in Da Gama's arrival and in Europe's spice trade with India.)

Over the next 250 years or so, British, Dutch, and French trading companies repeatedly attempted to establish posts, factories, and forts on the subcontinent, often in conflict with each other, with the Portuguese, and with Indian rulers (especially the Mughals). The British East India Company finally won in 1757, and established its rule in Bengal, with its capital at Calcutta. A century later, Indians waged their first "war of independence" against the Company in the "Mutiny" of 1857. At the end of that conflict, the British Crown and Parliament dissolved the East India Company and took over direct rule of India. In 1885, the Indian National Congress launched a peaceful political movement for independence from Britain, which culminated in the "freedom movement" led by Mahatma Gandhi, and the subcontinent's decolonization in 1947.

2. KERALA

2.1. Geography

Kerala is a state on the southwestern tip of the Indian peninsula. It shares a border on the east with the state of Tamil Nadu (the Tamil-speaking region), and on the north with the state of Karnataka (the Kannada-speaking area). Its western and southern coastline runs along the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean; its narrow coastal plains rise up to a mountain range called the Western Ghats, which define an edge of the southern end of the Deccan Plateau. The interior of Kerala is crisscrossed by rivers, and is dotted with lakes and wetlands. About a quarter of the state's land area is covered with moist and dry tropical forests. The natural environment of Kerala contains an astonishing range of flora and fauna, including many unique species.

2.2. Cities

The three main urban centers in Kerala are the port-cities of *Calicut* (now Kozhikode) and *Cochin* (now Kochi), and the modern state capital, *Trivandrum* (now Thiruvananthapuram). In the ancient period of Indian history, Calicut was already famous for its textiles (Calicut muslin was exported to the Egypt of the Pharaohs), and Cochin for its spices and handicrafts (which subsequently attracted European traders of the Renaissance period).

During India's classical and middle periods (especially 5th-15th centuries), Chinese maritime traders docked regularly at both these ports. Chinese and Indian boats of these times transported Indian goods from the Malabar (Kerala) Coast to the Persian Gulf and Arabia, for exchange with Persian, Arab, and African traders. Arab traders, particularly, transported Indian goods overland

by caravans to the Mediterranean region, from where they reached Europe. Vasco da Gama established a direct European sea-route to Cochin in 1498, which enabled European traders to “bypass” the Arab intermediaries thereafter, and hence to exercise greater control over—and generate larger profits from—the supply of Indian spices, textiles, and handicrafts to the West. (In medieval Europe, Indian spices supplied by Arabs were essential for the preservation of meat, especially through long winters.)

2.3.Economy and Economic Activities

Kerala’s traditional economy centers around the cultivation of spices (black peppercorns, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, cardamom), extensive rice-cultivation (some 600 varieties of rice), and fishing (more than 300 fishing villages lie along the seacoast and the rivers). Its other agricultural products include coconut, cashew, tea, coffee, and rubber. About half of Kerala’s population today depends solely on agriculture for its livelihood. Among other traditional products are handloom textiles and garments (e.g., saris, *mundus*), handicrafts (decorative objects in many materials), and coir products (made from coconut fiber).

In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha belongs (by original lineage) to an “untouchable” caste that specializes in tree-climbing, an occupation associated with the tropical coconut palm-tree. The coconut tree is very tall and without branches; its fruit, the coconut, grows near its top, just under the umbrella-like fronds. A traditional “tree climber” in Kerala climbs up the vertical trunk of the tree—a dangerous occupation requiring extraordinary training and physical skill—and cuts down a crop of coconuts with a scythe. In coastal India, where coconut trees flourish naturally, this occupation is traditionally reserved for “untouchables.” Before its conversion to Christianity, Velutha’s family belonged to this social group. (In the novel, Velutha’s father is the one to have undergone this religious conversion.)

Velutha also comes from a lineage of “toddy-tappers.” Toddy (also called palm wine) is a traditional alcoholic beverage in Asia and Africa, produced from the sap of a palm, such as the coconut tree. The sap has to be drawn from incisions in the coconut flowers, and hence requires tree-climbing. The sap naturally contains yeasts that ferment it within a few hours to a sweet, mildly intoxicating drink; within about a day, the sap becomes acidic and sour, and turns into vinegar. Fresh toddy is used overnight to leaven dough made of rice-flour; the risen dough is used to make pancake-like breads, called *vellai appam*, which are a staple breakfast and dinner item in Syrian Christian cuisine in Kerala.

Despite his “inherited” occupations, Velutha has a gift for making things with his hands, and becomes a carpenter, even though carpentry is not an occupation that “untouchables” are conventionally allowed to take up in Kerala’s caste system. (Carpenters are *shudras*, but not “untouchables.”) Given his talents, Velutha subsequently becomes a general handyman, repairing and maintaining machines, electrical gadgets, etc., in the pickle factory and around the family home. The fact that he is the son of someone who has converted to Christianity gives Velutha some “mobility” with respect to his occupation and livelihood; but, as the novel reminds us in various ways, this freedom is limited in practice, because recent converts to Christianity often do not lose the social stigma of their earlier low-caste or “untouchable” Hindu origins.

2.4. Languages

The three most commonly used languages in modern Kerala are Malayalam, Tamil, and English; each of these has its own script. Kerala has the highest literacy rate among Indian states, of 97%; this means that the great majority of its inhabitants can read and write at least one of these three languages; most high-school graduates and college graduates are literate in two of these languages.

In *The God of Small Things*, most of the educated “upper” and “middle” class characters—Rahel, Estha, Ammu, Chacko, Baby Kochamma, Inspector Thomas Mathew—would be fluently bilingual in Malayalam and English. In contrast, the “lower” class characters, such as Velutha, Vellya Paapen, and Kochu Maria would be monolingual Malayalam-speakers, though Velutha and Kochu Maria are likely to have a smattering of English.

Father Mulligan is an Irish “settler” in India, but he has most likely learned Malayalam over the years. Comrade Pillai, as his name indicates, belongs to a community of old or modern immigrants from Tamil Nadu; he would be trilingual in Tamil, Malayalam, and English. (“Pillai” is the common surname of Hindus belonging to a particular caste; until about 500 years ago, Pillais often served as administrators and bureaucrats in Tamil kingdoms; in colonial and modern times, some of them have migrated to Kerala, where they frequently own agricultural land, and serve as managers and government officials.)

In contrast, Baba—Ammu’s ex-husband and Rahel and Estha’s father—is bilingual in Bengali and English, and may know some Assamese, since he works on a tea-estate in Assam, in northeastern India. Mr Hollick, Baba’s superior on the tea-estate, is an Englishman, and is most likely monolingual in English.

2.5. Politics

Since the 1920s and 1930s, Kerala has developed a strong regional and local culture of peasant movements, labor unions, and populist politics; this has provided the grass-roots support for the Communist Party, which has been elected to state office frequently since the 1950s. For most of the past six decades, Kerala has been a “socialist democratic welfare state” within the Indian republic. When not in power, the state’s Communist Party has formed the principal opposition party in the legislature.

In *The God of Small Things*, Comrade Pillai is a member of Communist Party, who organizes the party’s activities in the Ayemenem-Kottayam area in Kerala. In the 1950s and 1960s, two distinct “factions,” called the Communist Party (Marxist) [known as the CP(M)] and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) [known as the CP(ML)], respectively, broke away from the older Communist Party of India [the CPI], and emerged as separate, more radical political organizations. The Naxalites are activists in a much more violent branch of the CP(ML) in the state of West Bengal, who became active in eastern India around 1967. In contrast, during the 1950s and 1960s, the CP(M) communists in Kerala, led by E.M.S. Namboodripad, adopt a program of peaceful transition to comprehensive socialism.

3. AYEMENEM (Aymanam)

Aymanam is a real-life village in south-central Kerala, just north of the River Minachil, near the town of Kottayam. In 1969, the date of many of the events in *The God of Small Things*, Aymanam was located 2-3 miles outside Kottayam's urban area, but now the village stands on the fringes of the town across the river. Fifteen years after the publication of Roy's novel in 1997, Aymanam has a population of about 35,000, whereas Kottayam has a population of about 170,000. The Ayemenem and the Kottayam that Roy evokes imaginatively in her story are much smaller, more rustic, less crowded, and less modern places. The River Meenachal and its dense natural environment that Roy recreates are more "primordial" than they might appear in photographs, videos, or descriptions today.

Aymanam is still more village than town. Kottayam, however, is very much a 21st-century urban center now, a bustling location for publishers and printers of important periodicals, literary activities, information technology, banking, and educational institutions. Kottayam is the administrative center for a major district of Kerala, and remains the principal town for the Syrian Christian community, which has been settled there for centuries.

II. SPECIFIC TOPICS ON KERALA

4. Locations and Landscapes

In Roy's narrative, the landscape of Ayemenem in 1969 is mostly rural, with some signs of urbanization (such as the highway); there is thick vegetation everywhere, a rich variety of botanical species, and dense foliage along the river. This remains largely unchanged in the novel until its final events around 1992.

This "primordial" setting is imaginatively essential for the kind of story Roy wants to tell, in which "deeply unconscious" and natural "forces" seem to shape the lives and destinies of the fictional characters, outside their conscious control. Places and their locations therefore are very important for an understanding of Roy's narrative and her evocations of landscape. It is essential that students be able to locate various places on printed maps, interactive electronic maps, and hard-copy outline maps.

5. Climate

Kerala is close to the equator, and hence has a tropical climate with very little temperature variation over a day and over a year; daily lows average around 75 degrees F and daily highs between 80 and 95 degrees F. Due to the proximity of rivers, lakes, and especially the ocean, an average day-night cycle is warm and humid. (Traditional Kerala attire is designed for maximum comfort in such conditions—for example, cotton saris for women, cotton *mundus* for men and women, with the men, like Velutha, often working bare-chested.)

Kerala has more than 120 days of rain per year. Between June and August (the season of the Wouthwest Monsoon), it rains almost every day, for an average annual precipitation of more than 120 inches. The monsoon brings cyclones, gales, and torrential showers; the seas are rough with storm surges, and their general level rises. (The dense, lush vegetation in the Ayenem-Kottayam region in the novel is part of a moist tropical forest region in this climate.)

6. Religious Groups

In demographic terms, Kerala has a different mix of religious communities from the rest of India. The present-day population of the state breaks down roughly into 55% Hindus, 25% Muslims, and 19% Christians, with followers of other religions comprising the remaining 1%. The primary domestic and community language of all these groups is Malayalam, with English as a widely-used second language for communication across social divisions.

6.1.Hindus

Hindus in Kerala generally follow a simplified model of the caste system. Instead of distinguishing among four main caste-groups (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras) and the fifth group of “untouchables,” they distinguish mainly between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins, and separate these two broad categories from the category of “untouchables.” Thus, Brahmins alone constitute a “high caste” in Kerala, all others being either uniformly “low caste” or “untouchable.”

6.2.Muslims and Jews

The Muslims of Kerala are known as Mapilla or *Moplah Muslims*, and they belong to a particular variety of orthodox Sunni Islam. Historically, the Moplahs trace their ethnic and religious origins to Arab maritime traders who arrived and settled in coastal southern India and Sri Lanka starting in the 8th century. Kerala’s early Muslim settlers are historically connected to similar groups that migrated at the same time to Sri Lanka, which lies on the other side of the tip of the Indian peninsula.

The most unusual minority in Kerala are the *Cochin Jews*, descendents of Jews who fled from persecution in the Roman empire and migrated to Cochin, Kerala, in the 1st century. (Roy does not mention them in the novel.)

6.3.Syrian Christians

The Syrian Christians (or, more precisely, the Syriac Christians), the most notable members of the Christian community in Kerala, are descendents of the “high caste” Hindus believed to have been converted by St Thomas around A.D. 52. St Thomas was one of the 12 Apostles who were the companions of Jesus Christ at the Last Supper (he is popularly known as “Doubting Thomas”); after the Resurrection, he is said to have migrated to India, where he died and is buried in what is now the city of Madras (Chennai), in the state of Tamil Nadu. The Syrian Christians are also known as St Thomas Christians, Malabar Christians, or Nasrins (Nazarenes).

Syrian Christians, and the Christians who broke away from them to form separate churches (especially in the 16th century and later), are broadly distinguished from two other types of Christians, who appeared much later in Kerala's history as converts mostly from among "low caste" Hindus and "untouchables":

- (a) Roman Catholics, converted initially by the Jesuit, St Francis Xavier, in the 16th century, and later by other Catholic missionaries in Kerala; and
- (b) Protestants, such as those converted to the Anglican Church by English missionaries in the British colonial period.

Historically, the discrimination against "low" castes and "untouchables" in Hinduism has been reproduced against these converts within Christianity, so that "caste" reappears in the Catholic and Protestant churches in Kerala and elsewhere in India. (*The God of Small Things* refers to these phenomena in passing.)

Kottayam and the region around it have the largest concentration of Syrian Christians, who are relatively prosperous, are well-educated, and own land and property. The principal family depicted in Roy's novel—like her mother's family in real life—is an extended Syrian Christian family that owns and operates a pickle factory in Ayemenem in the 1960s.

7. Marriage and Family

In most Kerala households, 3 or 4 generations of a family usually live together: grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren. As a result, the lives of people in these generations are intimately interconnected. For practical and emotional reasons, and also by longstanding social convention, members of an inter-generational family maintain close ties with their extended family. As a result, aunts and uncles, first and second cousins, and nephews and nieces frequently are also part of a family's "inner circle." This pattern is widespread among Hindus, Christians, and Muslims in Kerala. This pattern appears on a large scale in Roy's novel.

8. Gender

Female characters predominate in *The God of Small Things*. This reflects the broader fact that women in Kerala are more empowered than in most other parts of India: they have a very high literacy rate, are better educated, have greater access to vocational and professional training, are able to join modern professions and earn a good living before and after marriage, and usually enjoy greater social independence and personal freedom, especially in urban environments. Among "high caste" Hindus in the state, the Nairs (Brahmins) are historically famous for their centuries-old matriarchal system, in which women inherit and control property, and men play a subordinate social and economic role. Among Christians, women are especially associated with the medical profession; Christian women from Kerala have been predominant as nurses all over India for several decades.

9. Politics

Roy's novel refers to the Congress Party (originally the Indian National Congress, launched in 1885) and the Communist Party of India (formed in the 1920s). In 1969 and 1992—the years when the story's main events take place—the Congress Party was in power at the national level, and the Communist Party was in power in Kerala. As noted above, the widespread peasant and labor movements and trade union activities that started in the state in the 1920s and 1930s provide the foundation for the Communist Party's dominant role in Kerala politics since the 1950s. Roy refers specifically to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [known as CP(M)], a “breakaway faction” of the older Communist Party of India that became dominant in Kerala under the leadership of E.M.S. Namboodripad from the 1950s onward.

10. Music

The God of Small Things refers to the *chenda* drum, a spectacular percussion instrument in Kerala's classical and folk musical tradition. The *chenda* is a cylindrical wooden drum with drumheads made of animal skin mounted at both ends, and tightened with ropes; it is 1 ft in diameter and 2 ft long. The drum is positioned vertically, slung from the drummer's shoulder, and played on one drumhead with a stick and with the drummer's fingers. The drum was traditionally used for ritual music in Hindu temples, and as an accompanying instrument for dance and dance-dramas. A modern *chenda* performance on a secular stage (called a *Thayambaka*) has two or three master players, accompanied by several bass drummers, and one or two cymbal players. Roy's narrative refers to *chenda* drums accompanying the performance of a Kathakali dance-drama.

11. Dance

Roy's novel celebrates a performance of Kathakali, a classical dance-drama form unique to Kerala that is ranked among the most distinguished performance genres in world dance. A Kathakali performance enacts a well-known story, usually taken from either the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, which are ancient Indian epics in the Sanskrit language. All the dancer-actors are men, and they play male as well as female roles on an almost-bare stage in the precincts of a Hindu temple. They wear heavy make-up, large and richly molded and painted headgear, long fingernails, jewelry, rings, and billowing skirts. The actors do not speak, but instead convey the story and its emotional intricacies entirely through body movements, hand gestures, facial expressions, and eye movements. They are accompanied by a small group of singers, drummers, and cymbal players standing on the side of the stage, who render the narrative in Sanskrit and Malayalam. A Kathakali performance usually lasts from dusk to dawn.

The dance-drama described at length in *The God of Small Things* retells an episode from the *Mahabharata*, in which one of the queens in the epic, Kunti, appears along with her abandoned illegitimate son, Karna, who has been raised by a low-caste chariot-driver. Despite his royal blood, Karna carries the lifelong stigma of illegitimacy as well as “low caste” upbringing, which become the source of his perpetual wrath and vengefulness as a warrior. In Roy's narrative, Karna's tale becomes an allegory for the injustice and resultant fury experienced by any “untouchable” in modern India.

III. WEB RESOURCES FOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In general, the best web resources for maps of India, Kerala, etc., are *Google Maps* and *National Geographic.com*. Both have “road maps” as well as maps with satellite images at high magnification.

The most reliable background information on India is provided by *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* and *BBC.com*.

A large amount of information on India, Kerala, etc., is available on *Wikipedia*. Some of the information is reliable, and some of the articles are good. But, in general, a lot of the information in Wikipedia articles is unverified, and is presented in articles that are imbalanced (in organization and emphasis) or inadequately documented. Please use any material obtained from Wikipedia judiciously, after you have corroborated it from other sources.

YouTube offers a wide range of images and videos on India, Kerala, etc. However, the quality and usefulness of this visual material are quite variable. A high proportion of it may be a waste of time for our purposes; students should be encouraged to explore YouTube resources, but with specific goals and for well-defined activities.

A. Web Resources on India

(1) *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*—Concise Edition or School Edition.

This is the most reliable online source of current information on most aspects of India. If you have access to any shorter online edition of the Encyclopedia, go to its Home Page and use the Search box to look up any specific topic (e.g., India History, India Economy, India Society, Caste, Hinduism, Christianity in India, etc.). Most such search terms will yield compact entries containing the most useful, verified information on the topic.

(2) *BBC.com*.

Log on to BBC Home Page, choose Asia from main menu, scroll to bottom of Asia page, and find list of Country Profiles. Click on India; review material on the Overview, Facts, and Timeline tabs.

The BBC website can be explored for recent news items on Kerala, if students are interested. (Unfortunately, some excellent BBC videos on Kerala are not available for viewing online in the U.S.) This is a reliable and very useful resource for many basic facts about contemporary India, though the Timeline may be too detailed and distracting for high-school students.

B. Web Resources on Kerala

Wikipedia article: “Kerala”

On the whole, the main Wikipedia entry on Kerala contains interesting and reliable information; but the article is uneven in its style and organization, and is much too detailed for

our purposes. The best use of this resource for teachers as well as students would be to consult only select sections of the article; the sections on Geography, Climate, Flora and Fauna, and Demographics may be the most informative and stimulating.

Also consult the *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* on Kerala, for more concisely presented information.

C. Web Resources on Syrian Christians

1. **YouTube Videos:** Two-part video series, “Christianity in Kerala,” produced by the University of Texas, and narrated by a Syrian Christian faculty member.
[Each video is about 15 minutes, and provides a rich account of the contemporary Syrian Christian way of life in Kerala, its history, and its contexts in the larger society around it.]

Also the video, “History—Syrian Orthodox Christians Kerala.”

2. **Wikipedia article: “Syriac Christianity.”** Also see the Wikipedia articles on “Syro-Malabar Catholic Church of India” and “Saint Thomas Christians.”
[These articles are very informative, but some of their claims are unverified, and their quality is uneven. Use judiciously. They are too detailed for students.]

D. Web Resources on Kerala’s Music and Dance

YouTube Videos:

1. Video, “Chenda Drums from Kerala, Thayambaka” (1 hr 40 min.)
[A world-class performance on *chenda* drums by two master players, on an open-air secular stage; watch the first 15 minutes and the final 5 minutes for an excellent sample of this music. Students with an interest in music will love this.]
2. Video, “Ten Minutes of Brilliant Triple Thayambaka” (10 min.)
[A superb segment from a performance on *chenda* drums by three master players at a Hindu temple.]
3. Video, “Kalyanasougandhikam in Kathakali, Part 1” (about 10 min.)
[A good performance of Kathakali, with an introduction.]

IV. SUGGESTED STUDENT ACTIVITIES ON INDIA AND KERALA

A. On Maps, Locations, and Landscapes

1. Log on to *NationalGeographic.com*. Go to Maps Home, which displays an interactive world map. First, locate South Asia or the Indian subcontinent as a whole on the world

map; zoom in to view Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Tibet (China), Bhutan, Myanmar (formerly Burma), Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives together.

Then, zoom in on India as a whole; locate the cities of New Delhi, Calcutta (now Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai), and Madras (Chennai); locate the state of Kerala as a whole, and identify the cities of Calicut (Kozhikode), Cochin (Kochi), and Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram).

Finally, locate and zoom in on the inland town of Kottayam (southeast of Cochin); at highest magnification, locate the village Aymanam, a little northwest of Kottayam, and the River Meenachal (Minachil).

2. Log on to **Google Maps**. Search for Kottayam, Kerala, India; explore the map of the Kottayam urban area, with Aymanam on its upper edge; switch to Satellite view, zoom in to maximum magnification, and “travel” through Kottayam to the Minachil (Meenachal) River; “ride” along the zigzagging waterway to Aymanam and explore the village area.

Supplementary Exercises: On the Google map of India, search for the state of Assam and for the town of Shillong—where Estha and Rahel’s father lives, on a tea-estate. [Similar searches can be recommended for other places in India mentioned in the narrative, such as Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai).]

3. On a large **printed map in an atlas**: find a map of South Asia or the Indian subcontinent; locate the Himalayas (mountains), the River Ganges, the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean; identify the cities of New Delhi, Calcutta (Kolkata), Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai); identify the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala.
4. On **outline maps**, by hand: (a) on an outline map of Asia, label the main countries in South Asia; (b) on an outline map of India, label the cities of New Delhi, Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), Madras (Chennai); the state of Kerala; the cities of Cochin and Kottayam in Kerala; and the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean.

[Work by hand on hard copies of outline maps reinforces the importance of correct locations, identifications, and spellings of unfamiliar place-names.]

B. On Aymanam and Kottayam

Search Google Images for photographs of Aymanam and Kottayam, especially of Syrian Christian churches and contemporary homes.

C. On Climate and Economic Activities

On the Images and Videos sections of **Google** and **YouTube**:

1. Search for images and videos of *storms* and *monsoon rains* in Kerala.
2. Search for images and videos of *tree-climbing* and *toddy-tapping on coconut palms* in Kerala.
3. Search for images and videos of *rice-planting in India*.
4. Watch the YouTube video, “Handloom Industry Kuthumpulli, Thrissur” (Kerala). [It shows how women’s saris and men’s *mundus* are woven on large handlooms today.]

Arundhati Roy and Indian Fiction in English: A Short Introduction

Aparna Dharwadker

The development of English as a literary language in India is a transformative and long-term effect of British colonialism, which functioned as the dominant political and cultural force in the country during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay, the Law Member of the Supreme Council of India, proposed in his “Minute on Indian Education” that the British colonial government should discontinue its support of Sanskrit and Persian (the classical and Islamic imperial languages, respectively), and institute English as the medium of instruction in its schools. The prompt implementation of this policy through the English Education Act of 1835 began an irreversible process by which an ever-increasing urban population of middle- and upper-class Indians adopted English as the medium of education, business, professionalization, public discourse, and—on a limited scale—creative expression in poetry and prose. By the end of the nineteenth century, Indian literature in English included poets such as Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, and Aurobindo Ghose, who wrote primarily or exclusively in English; and authors such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Rabindranath Tagore, who practiced multiple literary genres and had equal facility in English and Bengali.

The significant tradition of fiction in English by Indian authors began in the 1930s with an unexpected surge of novels: *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *The Village* (1939), and *Across the Black Waters* (1939) by Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004); *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), and *The Dark Room* (1938) by R. K. Narayan (1906-2001); and *Kanthapura* (1938) by Raja Rao (1908-2006). Over the next four decades, all three of these authors maintained a steady output of long and short fiction as well as non-fictional prose, with Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) emerging as the first prominent woman author of acclaimed novels such as *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955) and *A Handful of Rice* (1966). The publication of Anita Desai’s *Cry the Peacock* in 1963 launched another prolific career in fiction that is still unfolding (the Indo-German author is now 75 years old), while the Polish author Ruth Praver Jhabvala continued the tradition of European fiction set in India with novels such as *Esmond in India* (1957) and *Heat and Dust* (1975; winner of the Booker Prize).

These authors, whose writing attracted international attention and garnered a worldwide audience in the course of the twentieth century, are Arundhati Roy’s precursors in the field of Indian-English fiction. Their novels, moreover, embody the peculiarities of English as a creative medium in India which Roy herself confronts and manipulates brilliantly in *The God of Small Things*. English is now unquestionably an Indian language, serving along with Hindi as a link language across the diverse regions of the country. Its success as a literary medium has also given it a prominent place in discussions of the internationalization of literature, and the emergence of global “englishes” in contradistinction to the Standard English of the imperial centre. But in India, unlike colonial and postcolonial locations in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, English has always existed in tension with more than a dozen fully developed indigenous languages, notably Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. The historical continuity and evolution of these languages makes them most nearly comparable to the modern European languages; indeed, the Columbia Indologist Sheldon Pollock calls the “unbroken tradition of literacy” on the subcontinent, involving successive generations, an ever-increasing number of languages, and

every conceivable degree of literary intricacy over some two and a half millennia, “a story of complex creativity and textual devotion with few parallels in history.” Except for the northern and central “Hindi” belt, which covers about half the country and contains more than half a billion people, the other languages have a strong “regional” presence which corresponds to the borders of Indian states, because after independence the country’s political map was redrawn along linguistic lines. Hence the majority language in the state of Bengal is Bengali, in the state of Gujarat is Gujarati, in the state of Punjab is Punjabi, and so on. Most Indians in urban and semi-urban areas are bilingual if not trilingual, and also have at least a working knowledge of English, even if they were educated primarily in another language.

Only a minuscule minority of Indians, however, could be described as monolingual in English, and even today we have to acknowledge that English does not have a “natural” or “primary” connection with landscape, place, or experience in India—some other language was acquired earlier and filled the cognitive space of the “mother tongue.” No matter how intrinsic English is as a creative medium to the Indian novelist, the narrative voice is almost always “translating” a landscape, a place, a community, or a set of experiences that occurred in another language into the medium of English. This is also true of much of the dialogue in Anglophone fiction, which ostensibly shows people in actual conversation with each other. In the Foreword to *Kanthapura* (1938), Raja Rao poignantly describes the difficulties of narrating the “legendary history” of the eponymous village that was his subject:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. . . . English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

The dilemmas outlined by Rao have persisted in Indian-English fiction, creating three characteristic effects. The first is a preoccupation with evoking landscape and place that suggests that certain novels are written primarily to memorialize particular geographies. This is certainly true of Ayemenem, the setting of Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, which even has the same name as the small village in Kerala where her mother Mary’s family was settled, and owned a pickle factory. The second is the saturation of a narrative in English with the names of places, characters, and things that belong originally to another linguistic and cultural register, so that the narrative performs the function of “naturalizing” the two disparate systems and making them mutually compatible. The third is an interest in inflecting English with the speech rhythms of particular places, so that English novels written by authors from different regions in India sound very different from each other.

All these qualities come readily into view if we consider the beginnings of two classic Indian-English novels—Rao’s *Kanthapura* and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* (1936)—and compare them with the beginning of *The God of Small Things*. This is how *Kanthapura* opens:

Our village—I don’t think you’ve ever heard about it—Kanthapura is its name,

and it is in the province of Kara.

High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane. Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambe and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There, on the blue waters, they say, our carted cardamoms and coffee get into the ships the Red-men bring, and, so they say, they go across the seven oceans into the countries where our rulers live.

This opening mentions a fictional place right at the beginning, but specifies exactly where it is on the West coast of India by naming a lot of other real places. Standard English syntax is altered to catch a particular speech rhythm, and the repetition of “they say” indicates that the narrator is going by hearsay, not first-hand knowledge. Colonialism is figured brilliantly and indirectly in the “Red-men” who bring the ships, and the countries across the seven seas where the rulers live. We also learn soon that the narrative voice belongs to an old woman from the village of Kanthapura in Karnataka in the 1920s, and so the language underlying her English is Kannada.

The beginning of Anand’s *Coolie* sets a different tone altogether.

“Munoo ohe Munooa oh Mundu!” shouted Gujri from the veranda of a squat, sequestered, little mud hut, thatched with straw, which stood upon the edge of a hill about a hundred yards away from the village in the valley. And her eagle-eyes explored the track of gold dust which worked its zigzag course through rough scrub, beyond the flat roofs of the village houses, under the relentless haze of the Kangra sun. She could not see him.

“Munoo ohe Munooa oh Mundu! Where have you died? Where have you drifted, you of the evil star? Come back! Your uncle is leaving soon, and you must go to town!” And her gaze travelled beyond the mango-grove to the silver line of the river Beas, and roved angrily among the greenery of the ferns and weeds and bushes that spread on either side of the stream against the purple gleam of the low hills.

Here the north Indian reader would know immediately that the speaker is a woman from a village in Punjab near the Beas river, that she’s annoyed with a young man who is absent when he should have been present, and that she has no hesitation in cursing him out soundly. “Where have you died” is a straight translation of a Punjabi and Hindi expostulation. The other conspicuous quality is the contrast between the crudity of the dramatized dialogue and the sophistication of the omniscient narrative voice—a juxtaposition that is very visible in Roy’s novel as well.

Almost exactly sixty years later, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* begins as follows.

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees.

Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

The nights are clear, but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation.

But by early June the southwest monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen.

Like her precursors in the 1930s, Roy also specifies a place and a landscape immediately, but we only have to read the first paragraph to sense a fundamental change. Style and invention are now in the foreground. The focus is not only on *what* you are describing, but *how* you're describing it. Phrases such as "dissolute bluebottles," "fatly baffled," and "immodest green" stand out, along with coinages like "dustgreen" and "mossgreen." There are many very short sentences, not just here but throughout the novel. One major literary dimension of *The God of Small Things*, then, is the deliberate artistry with which English is used to evoke *this* special landscape.

There are several other language-related qualities particular to Roy's writing that we should bear in mind when reading *The God of Small Things*. To begin with, she belongs to the first full generation of middle-and-upper class urban Indians who would have been educated primarily in English, making English their virtual first language or one of two first languages. In fact, the predominance of English in education and professional life now often puts the so-called "mother-tongue" in a subsidiary position, especially if it is not the writer's creative medium. The adventurousness with language in *The God of Small Things* points to an author who is just more comfortable with the medium because she has been much closer to it than previous generations of Indian-English authors.

Furthermore, Roy is writing about the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, which would have a closer historical and sociological connection with English because of education and religious practice. The lore in the Ipe family about one of their ancestors being blessed by the Patriarch of Antioch, the figures of Father Mulligan the Irish priest and Kari Saipu the Black Sahib, Chacko's Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford, his English wife Margaret and his half-English daughter Sophie, his job at Madras Christian College, etc., are signs of an internationalism and cosmopolitanism that are significantly mediated by Christianity and English. In contrast with a novel like *Kanthapura* or *Coolie*, therefore, *The God of Small Things* is populated by many characters whose dialogue is not "translated" because they *would* speak originally in English to each other, while also being fluent in Malayalam, the majority language of the state of Kerala. All the members of the Ipe family—Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Chacko, and the twins Estha and Rahel—belong to this group. Margaret and Sophie Mol are monolingual in English. The "untouchable" worker Velutha, his brother Kuttappen and his father Vellya Paapen, the cook Kochu Maria, and the workers at the Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory would be virtually monolingual in Malayalam, mainly because of their class. Comrade K. N. M. Pillai the Communist leader, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man at Abhilash Talkies in Cochin, and Inspector Thomas Matthew at the Kottayam Police Station are all threatening male figures who are bilingual, and use language strategically in their power games. Towns and cities in the novel carry Malayalam names; homes, businesses, and organizations are named mainly in

English. The English of *The God of Small Things* is generously leavened with Malayalam, and also evokes a world in which the two languages have completely penetrated each other.

At the deepest level of linguistic self-reflexivity, the novel mimics the cognitive processes by which language is acquired and understood, focusing on the consciousness of seven-year old fraternal twins who process English through Malayalam as well as their eccentric imaginations. After Sophie Mol's funeral, for instance, Rahel describes the words on her tombstone: "A SUNBEAM LENT TO US TOO BRIEFLY," and then adds, "Ammu explained later that Too Briefly meant For Too Short a While" (p. 9). When Chacko describes his father Pappachi as an "Anglophile," the narrator tells us that "He made Rahel and Estha look up *Anglophile* in the *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary*. It said: *Person well disposed to the English*. Then Estha and Rahel had to look up *dispose*" (pp. 50-51). One of the twins' favorite games is to "read words backwards," a practice that transmutes the most ordinary English words into exotic gibberish, and the novel recreates the effects of such licence graphically by printing words in reverse on several occasions. In still other places, the narrative voice vividly captures the "misreading" that marks a child's interpretive efforts when fear and anxiety intervene.

"If you ever, Ammu said, "and I *mean* this, EVER, ever again disobey me in Public, I will see to it that you are sent away to somewhere where you will jolly well learn to behave. Is that clear?"

When Ammu was really angry, she said Jolly Well. Jolly Well was a deeply well with larfing dead people in it. (P. 141).

The orthographic and semantic irregularities of this short passage—the italics, block letters, unexpected capitals, misspellings, and misinterpretations—exactly reproduce the jumble inside the head of a seven-year old who cannot bear to alienate her beautiful, vulnerable mother. The creative liberties Roy takes with all aspects of the English language in order to capture the voices of childhood are among the outstanding features of *The God of Small Things*.

In many respects, then, Roy's preoccupations with place and language connect her firmly to the tradition of fiction in English inaugurated in the late colonial period by Anand and Rao; but in other important respects, she is part of postcolonial reconfigurations that have transformed the conditions of writing as well as reception for the Indian-English novelist. Well-known author Salman Rushdie is widely regarded as the crucial transitional figure in this respect, because the extraordinary success of his novel *Midnight's Children* (1980) finally laid to rest a century-long debate about whether it was appropriate for Indians to write in English, or if they could create anything truly extraordinary in the language. For several decades Indian-English poets and novelists had been described as "rootless," "alienated," "inauthentic," "pretentious," "self-centered," "over-privileged," "snobbish," "mediocre," and "parasitical," and had been accused of prostituting themselves for the sake of national and international attention. These objections became more or less moot after the appearance of *Midnight's Children*, which was also, ironically, the first major novel by an author of Indian origin to concern itself *with the history of modern India as a whole*. In this seminal work, the "Western" language became a means of intense *connection* rather than alienation from the nation, and this propensity for thinking in "national" rather than "regional" terms has marked many major novels that have followed in the wake of *Midnight's Children*.

Rushdie was also paradigmatic of another crucial change in creative contexts—the emergence of a postcolonial Indian diaspora in Britain, Europe, and North America, and the appearance of a host of diasporic novelists who achieved international prominence with unprecedented rapidity. Rushdie had left India at the early age of thirteen to be educated in England; he later took British citizenship, married an upper-class Englishwoman, and published his fiction with major British presses. More recent immigrant authors have typically left India as adults and often retained their Indian citizenship, but their literary careers have followed a similar trajectory because they have had access to the same leading Western publishers and international audiences. There are also a few second-generation fiction writers, such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, who have been born and/or brought up in the West, and both have made impressive entries onto the literary scene (Lahiri with a Pulitzer Prize in 2000, and Desai with a Booker prize in 2006). “Indian-English fiction” has therefore been rebranded now as “postcolonial anglophone fiction by authors of the global Indian diaspora,” and many of these authors have dual or multiple countries of residence even as they keep up an unwavering engagement with India-as-subject. Roy, for her part, has continued to live in Delhi, but in terms of subject, style, and audience, there is no *qualitative* difference between her fiction and that of a full-fledged diasporic author such as Rushdie.

The remarkable visibility of Indian/Indian diaspora authors on the current international literary scene can be gauged from the following chronological list, which begins with an author born in 1937 and ends with one born in 1974. Each author’s name is followed by the country or countries of extended residence, and the major literary awards he or she has received.

Anita Desai (b. 1937). India, UK, USA. Sahitya Akademi Award given by Indi’s National Academy of Letters), Alberto Moravia Literary Prize.

Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940). India, Canada, USA. National Book Critics Circle Award.

Salman Rushdie (b. 1947). India, UK, USA. Booker Prize, Booker of Bookers, Best of the Booker, Mantua Prize, James Joyce Award, Whitbread Award, etc.

Vikram Seth (b. 1952). India, USA. Commonwealth Writers Prize, Smith Literary Award, Crossword Book Award, EMMA Award, etc.

Rohinton Mistry (b. 1952). India, Canada. Governor General’s Award, Commonwealth Writers Prize (twice), Kiriyaama Book Prize, Neustadt Prize.

Githa Hariharan (b. 1954). India. Commonwealth Writers Prize.

Amitav Ghosh (b. 1956). India, UK, Egypt, USA.

Shashi Tharoor (b. 1956). India, Switzerland, Singapore, USA. Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasian Region).

Chitra Banerji Divakaruni (b. 1956). India, USA. Pushcart Prize, American Book Award.

Pico Iyer (b. 1957). UK, USA.

Mukul Kesavan (b. 1958). India.

Manil Suri (b. 1959). India, USA. Barnes & Noble Discover Award.

Upamanyu Chatterjee (b. 1959). India. Sahitya Akademi Award.

Vikram Chandra (b. 1961). India, USA. Commonwealth Writers Prize.

Arundhati Roy (b. 1961). India. Booker Prize.

Amit Chaudhuri (b. 1962). India, USA, UK. Commonwealth Writers Prize, LA Times Book Prize, Sahitya Akademi Award.

Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967). USA. Pulitzer Prize, O. Henry Award, PEN/Hemingway Award, Frank O’Connor Short Story Award, etc.

Hari Kunzru (b. 1969). India, UK.

Pankaj Mishra (b. 1969). India. LA Times Art Seidenbaum Award.
Kiran Desai (b. 1971). India, USA. Booker Prize.
Arvind Adiga (b. 1974). Booker prize.

This community of authors is marked by many notable features. All of its members are currently living, and sixteen of the twenty authors were born between 1952 and 1969. With the exception of the Nobel Prize, they have won every major Western and Indian literary prize between them. Arundhati Roy appears towards the end of the list as one of the younger members of the community, and is among a handful of authors (Hari Kunzru and Arvind Adiga being two others) who have published only one work of fiction to date. This fact, not remarkable in itself, is remarkable in the case of Arundhati Roy because in the fifteen years since *The God of Small Things* received the Booker Prize, she has published eleven book-length works relating to her activist political work. Roy has even remarked that she is essentially a public intellectual whose oeuvre includes one novel, and that the novel should be seen in relation to all her other political work. She may, or may not, then, publish another work of fiction—but she is, now and for the foreseeable future, a passionately engaged citizen of the world whose first and only novel can be counted among the contemporary world’s “great texts.”

THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS
CHRONOLOGY

- 1869** Reverend E. John Ipe born
"In 1876, when Baby Kochamma's father was seven years old..." (23).
- 1909** Baby Kochamma born
"She was eighty-three" when the twins return to Ayemenem in 1992 (21).
- 1938** Chacko born
"He was four years older than Ammu" (37).
- 1942** Ammu born
"She was twenty-seven that year" (in 1969) (38).
- 1945** Velutha born
"Velutha was ... about three years younger than Ammu" (71).
- 1958** Pappachi retired and moved from Delhi to Ayemenem
"Ammu finished her schooling the same year that her father retired...Two years went by. Her eighteenth birthday came and went" (38).
- 1960** Mammachi's pickle factory started
"It was only in 1967 ... Paradise Pickles was seven years old" (65).
- 1961** Sophie Mol born
"Estha and Rahel were seven years old when she died. Sophie Mol was almost nine" (6).

Chacko and Margaret divorced
"By the time Sophie Mol was born ... [Margaret] asked him for a divorce".
- Nov 1962** Rahel and Estha born
"It was ... 1962 ... In November ... Estha and Rahel were born" (40).
- 1965** Ammu's divorce and return to Ayemenem (with Rahel and Estha)
"When ... the war with Pakistan began, Ammu left her husband" (42).
- 1967** Pappachi's death
"1967 ... Pappachi was dead by then" (68).
- Early 1969** Joe's death
"Earlier that year ... Joe, had been killed in a car accident" (36).
- Dec 1969** **NARRATIVE PAST**
- the drive to Cochin (to visit the cinema, stay overnight in a hotel, and meet Sophie Mol and Margaret at the airport the next day)
 - the Communist march
 - the visit to the cinema (Abhilash Talkies – to see *The Sound of Music*)
 - Estha and the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man incident
 - overnight stay at the Hotel Sea Queen

- the Cochin Airport visit to collect Sophie Mol and Margaret
- Sophie Mol and Margaret's arrival and visit
- Sophie Mol's death (by drowning 2 weeks after her arrival) and her funeral
- Ammu and Velutha's affair (started on the day of Sophie Mol's arrival and ended 2 weeks later – after Sophie Mol and Velutha's deaths)
- Velutha's death (after a severe beating by the police)
- Estha 'Returned' – sent to live with his and Rahel's father

1992

NARRATIVE PRESENT

- Estha 're-Returned' – sent back to Ayemenem
- Rahel, now divorced, returns to Ayemenem from America
- Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria sole inhabitants of the Ipe family home in Ayemenem
- Chacko now living in Canada
- Ammu and Mammachi now dead

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Teaching *The God of Small Things* in Wisconsin

Great World Texts: A Program of the Center for the Humanities, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Written by Sarah Harrison © 2012 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

Glossary of Terms

By Aparna Dharwadker, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abhilash Talkies. The cinema theatre in Cochin where Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man while his family is watching *The Sound of Music*. After the arrival of talking films, the theatres that screened them came to be called “Talkies” in India.

Alleppey. An important coastal city in Kerala about thirty miles from Aymanam, famous for its beaches and backwaters. Ammu dies in a boarding house in this city.

Ayemenem. An actual small town in Kerala, spelled "Aymanam." The family of Arundhati Roy's mother, Mary Roy, was settled there, and owned a pickle factory. The novelist spent a significant portion of her childhood in Aymanam, and it is the main setting for *The God of Small Things*.

Bhima and Dushasana. In the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is the wife of the five Pandava brothers Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva. Yudhishtira bets her in a game of dice, and loses her to his cousins and arch-rivals, the Kauravas. Dushasana (a Kaurava prince) insults her in open court by trying to strip her naked, but her virtue is protected by Lord Krishna, and she vows that her hair will remain loose until it is bathed in Dushasana's blood. Bhima, the most valiant and hot-tempered of the Pandava brothers, undertakes to fulfil Draupadi's vow by killing both Dushasana and his older brother Duryodhana, and succeeds in his quest on the final day of the Mahabharata war. This narrative is the subject of *Duryodhana Vadham*, the second Kathakali performance Rahel and Estha watch in Chapter 12. See also **Karna and Kunti**.

Caste. The basis of hierarchical organization in orthodox Hindu society. In this fourfold structure, Brahmins appear at the top as priests and scholars; Kshatriyas are the warriors and kings; Vaishyas are merchants; and Shudras are artisans and laborers. Untouchables are “polluted” communities that exist outside the caste divisions. See “Untouchables,” below.

Cochin. A historic port city in Kerala, which also hosts the region's major airport. This is where Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol arrive from England, and are greeted by Chacko and their other relatives. Cochin is vital to the history of trade and colonialism on India's west coast, and also an important point of entry for diasporic communities such as the Syrian Christians and the Cochin Jews. For more information, see “Background and Contexts.”

Communist. A follower of the system of political beliefs introduced in Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848), and later developed by twentieth-century revolutionary leaders such as Lenin and Mao. For a more detailed discussion of the influence of Communism in Kerala, see “Background and Contexts.” In the novel, Comrade K. N. M. Pillai is the local Communist leader, Velutha is a card-carrying member, and Chacko is a sympathizer despite his capitalist ownership of a factory.

Communist Party of India. This party was founded in 1920, and its principles influenced literature and the arts deeply from the 1930s to the 1950s. In 1964 it split into the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India–Marxist(CPM), and in 1971 a third major

branch, the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CP-ML) was established. Kerala and West Bengal are the two states in India that have had multiple communist governments since the 1960s. For more information see “Background and Contexts.”

Comrade. The term by which one member of the Communist party addresses another.

Coolie. In Asia, a pejorative term for a skilled or unskilled laborer.

Grotesque, the. A style of literature and/or art in which things are distorted and made bizarre. It can incorporate the supernatural, violence, the unmentionable, and sexuality.

Gulf-money. Since the 1970s, a large number of people from Kerala have gone to the oil-rich countries of the Persian Gulf as skilled laborers and professionals to increase their earnings dramatically. The shifts in residence are temporary, and meant purely for material gain.

History House. The abandoned home of Kari Saipu, the “Black Sahib,” which lies across the river, close to the hut where Velutha lives with Vellya Paapen and Kuttappen. Estha and Rahel become obsessed with this site and use the overgrown area surrounding it as their refuge from Ayemenem House. They run away to the History House after Ammu calls them the millstones around her neck; it is also where Amma and Velutha have their trysts, and the sleeping Velutha is captured and beaten by the police. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem as an adult, the house has become the Heart of Darkness, because it has been converted into a bland hotel catering to the tastes of cultural tourists.

Kathakali. A traditional art form native to Kerala, which combines narrative, dance, and “full-body acting.” In Chapter 12, Rahel and Estha watch an authentic Kathakali performance at the Ayemenem temple, spurred by the actors’ desire for redemption after they have prostituted their art before tourists. Kathakali performances are traditionally several hours long, but have been drastically abridged to cater to the short attention span and consumerism of foreigners. For more information, see “Background and Contexts.”

Kari Saipu. This name, which in Malayalam means “Black Sahib,” is given to the colonial Englishman who “goes native,” like the character Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and stays on in Ayemenem after Indian independence, only to commit suicide in 1959. According to the local lore, the ghost of Kari Saipu haunts the surroundings of his home, the History House, and solicits passers-by for a cigar.

Karna and Kunti. In the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*, Karna is Kunti’s oldest son by the Sun God, but she abandons him soon after birth because she is still unmarried. After marrying king Pandu, Kunti bears five more sons, the Pandava brothers Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva. The great eighteen-day war in the epic is fought between the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas, who have given Karna shelter and earned his loyalty. On the eve of the war, Kunti reveals to Karna that she is his mother, and asks him to promise that he will not harm his younger brothers. He promises to spare everyone except Arjuna, the great archer, but later dies at Arjuna’s hands on the battlefield, in part because of the promise his mother had extracted. The meeting between Kunti and Karna is the subject of *Karna Shabadam* (Karna’s Oath or Karna’s Words), the Kathakali performance that Rahel and Estha watch in Chapter 12. See also **Bhima and Dushasana.**

Kodam puli tree. A tree belonging to the species *garcinia cambogea* (and usually spelt “Kudampuli” in Malayalam) that bears pumpkin-shaped, sour-tasting fruit. The fruit has

digestive properties, and is used regularly in Kerala cuisine.

Kottayam. The town in Kerala that is geographically closest to Aymanam. Inspector Thomas Mathew belongs to the Kottayam police force, and it is at his station that Velutha dies of his injuries.

Mar Thoma Church. A Syrian Christian denomination in Kerala that traces its lineage back to St Thomas the Apostle, who is said to have arrived in this region and carried out the first conversions in 52 ACE.

Mol and Mon. Terms of affection in Kerala for a little girl and a little boy.

Mundu. The white cotton garment worn traditionally by men and certain categories of women in southern India, particularly in Kerala. It is tied at the waist and normally reaches the ankles, but peasants and workers of all kinds hoist it up to knee-length for ease of movement.

Namboodiripad, E. M. S (1909-1998). The most important Communist leader in post-independence Kerala, known popularly as “Kerala’s Mao Tse Tung.” In 1957 he became the Chief Minister of the first democratically elected Communist government in India (and the second in the world), and held the position twice---from 1957 to 1959, and from 1967 to 1969. He was also the leader of the opposition in the State Legislature from 1960-64, and 1970-77. *The God of Small Things* was published the year before Namboodiripad’s death, and he dismissed it as “bourgeois decadence,”

Naxalites. Followers of the Maoist political philosophy that led to an armed peasant uprising in the village of Naxalbari, in the state of West Bengal, in May 1967. The demand underlying the revolt was that land belongs to the tillers, not absentee landlords, and over four decades organized peasant resistance of this kind has gained strength in other parts of India, including Kerala.

Parashuram. The name of the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the god who is the “preserver” of creation in the Hindu trinity (the other two gods are Brahma the creator and Shiva the destroyer). According to myth, Parashuram was the “warrior-saint” who held back the waters on the western coast of India, and thus preserved the Malabar coast in Kerala.

Paravan. An Untouchable caste, usually of fishermen and tree-climbers. Velutha and his family are the principal Paravans in the novel, condemned to their Untouchable status by heredity.

Shillong. A city in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, where the twins Estha and Rahel are born in November 1962.

Untouchables. Members of “impure” communities at the bottom of the caste hierarchy in orthodox Hindu society, whose touch is “polluting” because they perform unclean tasks such as tanning, the cremation of dead bodies, and the disposal of night soil. In creating Velutha, the novel’s main Untouchable character, Roy appears to incorporate the Western meaning of “untouchable” as someone superior or irreproachable, and offers a moving portrait of a lovable, intelligent man doomed by the forces of history.

Notes on Characters

By Aparna Dharwadker

Rahel

The central character in *The God of Small Things*, who is Estha's female fraternal twin and alter ego. Although the novel has an omniscient narrator, much of the story is told from Rahel's point of view, and expresses her emotions and consciousness. She is parted from Estha as a seven-year old child in 1969 after the tragic death of Sophie Mol, and reunited with him in 1992 as a thirty-one year old woman. Her rebellious behavior in Ayemenem, erratic education in Kerala, Delhi, and the US, and short-lived marriage to the American Larry McCaslin are also important parts of the narrative.

Estha

Rahel's male fraternal twin, Estha (whose full name is Esthappen) is older by eighteen minutes and fully reciprocates his sister's deep bond with him. After Sophie Mol's death in 1969, he is sent to live with his father, Baba, in Calcutta (now Kolkata), but is "re-returned" to Ayemenem in 1992. Sometime after his arrival in Calcutta Estha stops talking, and remains mute for the rest of the novel. Most of the inhabitants in Ayemenem consider him crazy, but his reunion with Rahel after a 23-year long separation is one of the novel's most poignant events.

Sophie Mol

The daughter of Chacko and Margaret Kochamma. After the death of her stepfather, Joe, she arrives in Ayemenem with her mother for a brief Christmas visit, but drowns in the Meenachal river. She is said to have her grandfather Pappachi's nose, but otherwise looks very different from her cousins Estha and Rahel because of her Anglo-Indian parentage. Sophie's death is the traumatic central event that leads to the disintegration of the Ipe family, separating the twins from their mother Ammu and from each other.

Ammu

Estha and Rahel's mother. Eager to get away from her Syrian Christian upbringing in Kerala, at the age of nineteen she hastily marries a Bengali Hindu man described only as "Baba," but returns to Ayemenem with the twins after it becomes clear that her husband is an irresponsible alcoholic. After her brief but passionate love affair with the Untouchable handyman Velutha, Ammu is separated from her children, and banished from her parents' home. She dies of asthma at the age of thirty-one in a lonely boarding house in Alleppey, where she has gone for a job interview.

Baba

Estha and Rahel's father and Ammu's ex-husband, known only by the Bengali name for "father." He is an important character who does not actually appear in the novel, not do we ever learn his real name. Baba is an alcoholic who tries to persuade Ammu to safeguard his job by sleeping with his boss at the tea estate in Assam. He gives Estha a largely loveless home for two decades, and then decides to emigrate to Australia without his son.

Mammachi

Estha and Rahel's blind grandmother, who is reclusive by temperament and a devoted violin player. Her unhappy marriage to Pappachi includes habitual physical abuse which ends only when the grown-up Chacko intervenes. After Pappachi's death Mammachi becomes an entrepreneur and successfully runs the Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory. She is repelled by the affair between Ammu and Velutha, and metes out a punishment that leads to Ammu's death within a few years.

Pappachi

Estha and Rahel's grandfather, who holds the position of "Imperial Entomologist" in Delhi during the British colonial period, and is described as an "anglophile" by his son Chacko. Despite his upper-class upbringing and education, he habitually beats his wife Mammachi with a brass vase until Chacko forces him to stop. Pappachi never overcomes the professional disappointment of discovering a new species of moth but not having it named after him. The pride of his life after retirement is the sky-blue Plymouth that later comes to be associated with Chacko.

Baby Kochamma

Pappachi's sister, and Estha and Rahel's grandaunt. As a teenager she falls in love with Father Mulligan, the Irish priest, converts to Catholicism despite her family's objections, and decides to become a nun, but leaves the convent when she realizes that it cannot fulfill her romantic goals. Later she earns a degree in ornamental gardening and cultivates an elaborate garden around Ayemenem House, only to abandon it in her old age for television and entries in a diary. After the discovery of Ammu's affair with Velutha, Baby Kochamma tries to "save the family honor" by telling Inspector Thomas Mathew that Velutha had abducted the twins and raped Ammu. When the evidence fails to support these allegations, she coerces Estha into giving false testimony against Velutha.

Chacko

Estha and Rahel's uncle, Ammu's brother, and Mammachi and Pappachi's only son. He attends Oxford University as a left-leaning Rhodes Scholar, falls in love with Margaret while she is working as a waitress, and marries her. The marriage fails, however, because of his lazy nature

and slovenly ways. Chacko returns to Ayemenem to take over the management of his mother's pickle factory, hence becoming a capitalist proprietor with Communist sympathies. He continues to care deeply for Margaret and Sohie after Margaret remarries, but his well-intentioned Christmas invitation to them begins the chain of events that ends in Sophie's death.

Velutha

An Untouchable from the Paravan community of fishermen and tree-climbers, who works in the Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory and also serves as a handyman for the Ipe family. There is a deep mutual love between him and the twins that transcends the barriers of caste, class, and age---he is at once surrogate father, playmate, and friend. Velutha's brief affair with Ammu is the natural culmination of the love he has for her children, yet he pays for this "transgression" with his life. His membership in the local Communist party suggests a process of political education that should have emancipated him, but Velutha is a tragic figure betrayed by everyone: his own father, the Ipe family, the Communist party, the police, and most ironically, Estha.

Vellya Paapen

Velutha's father, and a Paravan with a deep sense of loyalty towards the Ipe family because he lives on their land, and Mammachi had paid for his prosthetic eye in the past in return for odd jobs. He is the first one to discover Velutha's affair with Ammu, and reports it to Mammachi immediately, offering to kill Velutha himself to atone for the shame he thinks his son has brought on the family of his benefactress.

Kuttappen

Velutha's paralyzed older brother. He tells Estha and Rahel how to fix the small boat they have discovered on the river bank, and hence contributes indirectly to the death of Sophie Mol.

Reverend E. John Ipe

The father of Pappachi and Baby Kochamma, and a priest in the Mar Thoma (Syrian Christian) Church. He is known popularly as *Punnyan Kunju* ("Little Blessed One") because he was reportedly blessed by the Patriarch of Antioch as a child. The Reverend Ipe does not appear in the novel, but is important in shaping the dynastic nature of the narrative.

Father Mulligan

An Irish Catholic priest who visits the Reverend Ipe in Ayemenem regularly when Baby Kochamma is a young woman. She fails to interest him, but in later life he leaves the church to become a follower of the Hindi god Vishnu, and keeps in touch with Baby Kochamma until his death.

Kochu Maria

The diminutive, temperamental cook and housemaid at Ayemenem House. After the Ipe family breaks up, she is the only other person living with Baby Kochamma until the twins return as adults. She likes to watch wrestling on television, and leads a sedentary life, like her employer.

Mr. Hollick

Baba's boss at the Assam tea estate. After Baba's alcoholism threatens his employment, Mr. Hollick suggests that Ammu sleep with him to save her husband's job. Baba's attempts to coerce Ammu into complying with this proposition end their marriage.

Larry McCaslin

Rahel's American ex-husband, whom she meets at the Delhi School of Architecture. He falls in love with and marries Rahel, but then feels completely disconnected from her. Rahel continues to work at a gas station in the Washington, D. C. area after their divorce, but moves back to Ayemenem when Estha returns there.

Joe

Margaret Kochamma's true love and Sophie Mol's stepfather. His death in a car accident is the event that motivates Chacko to invite Margaret and Sophie for a Christmas visit to Ayemenem.

Comrade K. N. M. Pillai

Leader of the Communist Party in Ayemenem, who has a precocious son named Lenin. Despite his proletarian politics, he looks down on Untouchables like Velutha, and turns the latter away on the night of his death. Before Velutha's arrest, Comrade Pillai lets Inspector Mathew know that the Communist Party has no interest in protecting the fugitive; after Velutha's death, Pillai exploits the event as an example of upper-class oppression, and organizes a strike that shuts down Chacko's pickle factory.

Kochu Thomban

An elephant that sleeps in the temple while Rahel and Estha watch the Kathakali performance.

Murlidharan

A homeless, mentally ill man who crouches naked on the Welcome sign for Cochin. He carries the keys to his last residence on a metal chain around his waist.

Orangedrink Lemondrink Man

The man at the Concessions stand in the lobby of Abhilash Talkies in Cochin. He molests Estha in the lobby while the rest of the family is watching *The Sound of Music*. Rahel intuits this event, which haunts Estha well into his adulthood.

Inspector Thomas Mathew

The police officer in Kottayam who interviews Baby Kochamma on the night Velutha dies. When her allegations against Velutha turn out to be baseless, he makes sure she manipulates the seven-year old Estha into giving false testimony. When Ammu goes to the police station with the twins to exonerate Velutha, he calls her a prostitute and advises her to go back home.

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The Caste System in India

What is the caste system?

According to Hindu tradition, Indian society is divided into hierarchical groups known as castes (*jatis*). Caste not only dictates one's occupation, but also dietary habits, dress codes, and interaction with members of other castes. Members of a high caste enjoy more wealth and opportunities while members of a low caste perform menial jobs. Upward mobility is very rare in the caste system. Most people remain in one caste their entire life and marry within their caste.

Castes fall into four basic groups known as *varnas*:

Brahmins—priests, scholars
Kshatriyas—warriors, kings
Vaishyas—traders, merchants, bankers
Shudras—laborers, servants, peasants

A fifth, large group of people known as Asprishya or “untouchables” exists in addition to these caste-groups. Untouchable jobs, such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal, bring them into contact with filth, bodily fluids, and trash. They are therefore considered “polluted” and not to be touched. As a result, they experience frequent social discrimination. In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha comes from a family of Paravans, a category of untouchables associated with fishing and boatbuilding.

Reform of the Caste System

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), a prominent figure in the early 20th-century movement for Indian Independence from British rule, campaigned to improve the rights of the untouchables, whom he called Harijans meaning “Children of God.” He made symbolic gestures, such as eating with them.

The Indian Constitution of 1950 outlawed discrimination against untouchables. This enabled them to obtain previously forbidden jobs and education.

Untouchables have also contested their “outcast” status by forming their own social and political groups, referring to themselves as “Dalits” (the “oppressed”). Many have converted from Hinduism to Buddhism.

Caste in Contemporary India

Although it is illegal to discriminate against “low” and “untouchable” castes in modern-day India, prejudice still continues. We see this in *The God of Small Things*, much of which is set in 1969, nearly two decades after the passing of this law. The growth of cities has created new forms of contact between different castes, which did not exist before, but it is still possible to see advertisements for housing and jobs specifying “Brahmins Only.” Much discrimination is unspoken, however, with “untouchables” regularly receiving lower pay and more menial jobs.

WHAT IS “CLOSE READING”?

Close reading is a specific method of literary analysis, which uses the interpretation of a small piece of a text as a way to think about the whole. This kind of analysis invites readers to pay close attention to the effects of the specific words on the page. We ask ourselves *why* each word was chosen, *how* it contributes to the broader themes and ideas of the text, and *how* it interacts with the other words/images of the text.

For example, the first sentence of *The God of Small Things* describes “May in Ayemenem” as a “brooding month.” Arundhati Roy could have described the atmosphere as “menacing” or “ominous”: these words technically have the same meaning, but we come away with different impressions. It’s our task to figure out just what effect these choices have. Since even synonyms are subtly different from one another, when we change a single word, we alter the sense of the text. Close reading asks us to pay attention to these nuances.

There is no “right” way to analyze a text, but there are more and less convincing ways of interpreting different passages. The steps below will help you to persuasively close read a passage in a literary text:

1. Summary

Read the passage once without making any annotations. Start by asking yourself: what’s going on here? What is the speaker/character/narrator saying? Who is speaking? In what context? If you are unable to write a 1-2 sentence summary of the passage, read through again until you have a clearer idea. Don’t panic if you’re unsure, many texts are deliberately ambiguous or confusing; it is not always possible to say for definite what is happening.

2. Mood & Tone

The second time you read through, think about the overall mood created by the writing. Is it comic, tragic, sinister, serious? What is the tone of the writing: formal, playful, ironic? Does the writer use understatement or exaggeration?

3. Literary Devices

Circle/underline the specific words, images and literary devices which contribute to the mood and tone you have identified. These might include any of the following:

- Unusual vocabulary/word choice (archaic words, neologisms, foreign imports, slang/colloquialisms). Use an online dictionary such as www.askoxford.com if you need to look up words you don’t recognize.
- Symbols: does the writer use images which seem to represent something else?
- Metaphors and/or similes
- Striking comparisons or contrasts
- Personification
- Alliteration and/or onomatopoeia

4. Structure

Consider the overall “shape” of the passage you are analyzing. In *The God of Small Things*, does Roy use regular punctuation and sentence structures? Is there dialogue in the piece? What is its effect?

5. Bigger Picture

Having considered these details, you can start to develop your overall interpretation of the passage. Consider the ways that your passage fits into the text as a whole. What do you think is the text’s main message? How does it contribute to the broader themes of the work? How do the particular literary devices you have identified help to emphasize, intensify or undercut the other questions and issues that the text raises?

WHAT IS “INTERTEXTUALITY”?

In a broad sense, intertextuality is the reference to or application of a literary, media, or social “text” within another literary, media, or social “text.” In literature, intertextuality is when a book refers to a second book by title, scene, character, or storyline, or when a book refers to a social “text” such as a media, social, or cultural story. This borrowing invites a *comparison* between your understanding of the text outside of the book, and its use inside of the book. Intertextuality asks us to think about *why* the author is choosing this particular literary or social text, *how* they are including the text in the book, and *to what effect* is the text re-imagined by the book, or the book shaped by the text.

Forms

1. Book in a Book

One form of intertextuality is a brief or prolonged reference to a literary text in a second literary text. For example, this reference might involve the author simply giving the title of another book, adopting a famous character name from another book, or revisiting a famous scene from another book. These brief references are meant to call attention to themselves as borrowing an outside text, and to how it is being applied and reworked in the primary book. Examples of longer intertextual references might include the adopting of an entire storyline from another book, or a lengthy scene from another book.

2. Other “Text” in a Book

A second form of intertextuality is a brief or prolonged reference to a media or social “text” in a literary text. For example, an author might reference a film, tv show, or song, or a well-known social “text” like the story of John F. Kennedy’s assassination or Rosa Parks’s bus ride. What makes intertextuality different from literature’s common mention of things in the media and society is that the “text” which the book references has a *narrative* quality. Therefore, we still have reference to a story within a book, even though the story is not a piece of literature.

Functions

1. Comparison

Intertextuality involves an implicit comparison by putting two “texts” together. When literature references another text, we are asked to draw from our knowledge of the text in its original form, and compare this to how it is being used, changed, or reframed by the primary book. Intertextuality functions on comparison and contrast of similarities and differences.

2. Dialogue

Intertextuality invites a conversational dialogue between two “texts.” Because both the primary book and its intertext are *narratives*, rather than static items or images, we can engage the full storyline that each contains to create a narrative conversation. Sometimes, the two narratives are very different and can therefore create competing dialogues about which is dominant, or most important.

3. Destabilization

Intertextuality can sometimes destabilize, or shake up our understanding of, the original text being referenced or a scene or idea in the primary book. The original text may be a “story” that most feel very familiar with, but its use or reframing by the primary book changes our feelings or reveals something new about this original story. Conversely, the book may be presenting a scene, character, or argument that we feel we are beginning to understand when it is disrupted and destabilized by entry of this intertext.

Effects

1. Transformation of the Primary Book

The first influence intertextuality can have is on a reader’s understanding of the primary book. This is a matter of evaluating effect on the book at hand. Why does the primary book choose this similar or dissimilar intertext, where is it used, how does it add to or change our understanding of the scene it is in, and how does it evoke important arguments the book is making overall?

2. Transformation of a Prior Text

Intertextuality can also influence our understanding of the original text, causing us to “reflexively” re-read, or reconsider, our understanding of the original text. Even if the outside text is not being reworded or rewritten in any way, by placing it in a new book, the outside text is reframed and therefore changed. Does the author explicitly or implicitly change the intertext from its original form and in what ways?

3. Reinterpretation of Both

Intertextuality can create a simultaneous re-reading of both the primary book and its intertext. This involves a back-and-forth re-reading of each text based on what their similarities and differences reveal about one another.

What is Postcolonial Literature?

In a broad sense, postcolonial literature is writing which has been “affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft et al, 2). In India’s case, this includes novels, poetry, and drama which were written both during and after the British Raj or “Reign,” which came to a formal conclusion with Indian Independence in August 1947. Although writing from India and other formerly colonized countries such as Nigeria, Jamaica, Pakistan, and Singapore has distinctive features, postcolonial literature shares some significant concerns and characteristics.

Concerns

1) *Reclaiming spaces and places*

Colonialism was, above all, a means of claiming and exploiting foreign lands, resources, and people. Enslavement, indentured labor, and migration forced many indigenous populations to move from the places that they considered “home”. Postcolonial literature attempts to counteract their resulting alienation from their surroundings by restoring a connection between indigenous people and places through description, narration, and dramatization.

2) *Asserting cultural integrity*

During colonization, the indigenous cultures of those countries subjected to foreign rule were often sidelined, suppressed, and openly denigrated in favor of elevating the social and cultural preferences and conventions of the colonizers. In response, much postcolonial literature seeks to assert the richness and validity of indigenous cultures in an effort to restore pride in practices and traditions that were systematically degraded under colonialism.

3) *Revising history*

Colonizers often depicted their colonial subjects as existing “outside of history” in unchanging, timeless societies, unable to progress or develop without their intervention and assistance. In this way, they justified their actions, including violence against those who resisted colonial rule. Revising history to tell things from the perspective of those colonized is thus a major preoccupation of postcolonial writing.

Characteristics

1) *Resistant descriptions*

Postcolonial writers use detailed descriptions of indigenous people, places, and practices to counteract or “resist” the stereotypes, inaccuracies, and generalizations which the colonizers circulated in educational, legal, political, and social texts and settings.

2) *Appropriation of the colonizers’ language*

Although many colonized countries are home to multiple indigenous languages—in India, for example, more than 12 languages exist alongside English—many postcolonial writers choose to write in the colonizers’ “tongue”. However, authors such as Arundhati Roy deliberately play with English, remolding it to reflect the rhythms and syntax of indigenous languages, and inventing new words and styles to demonstrate mastery of a language that was, in a sense, forced upon them.

3) *Reworking colonial art-forms*

Similarly, authors such as Arundhati Roy rework European art-forms like the novel to reflect indigenous modes of invention and creation. They reshape imported colonial art-forms to incorporate the style, structure, and themes of indigenous modes of creative expression, such as oral poetry and dramatic performances.

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