

# Something Is Foul in the State of Kerala: Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

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In a very general way, space matters in much secondary material on Roy's novel about three generations of an Indian family, who move to Western countries but return to Kerala. However, few of the articles theorize space or analyse the synchronic and diachronic networks of relationships and trajectories between and within global and local spaces. The present essay combines spatial theories with a postcolonial approach. In the present debate surrounding *The God of Small Things* we can distinguish between roughly five approaches to space: metaphorical, eco-critical, structuralist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial. Sharmita Lahiri, for instance, uses male and female space metaphorically in a rather loose sense, but she does not pay explicit attention to location.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Pablo Mukherjee reflects on the destruction of the environment and assesses the social consequences.<sup>2</sup> In a structuralist analysis, Cynthia Carey draws a convincing analogy between the conflict on the level of content and the fragmentation of language:

the difficult conflict, on the one hand, between the role of man-made places of fixed containment such as the house, and, on the other hand, the dynamic natural places such as the river. The central axis of the book is thus organized around the deadly confrontation, interaction and resistance between these

- 1 Sharmita Lahiri, "Alternate Visions of a Feminine Space in *Clear Light of Day* and *The God of Small Things*," *South Asian Review* 28.2 (2007): 142-45.
- 2 Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, "Arundhati Roy: Environment and Uneven Form," in *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives*, ed. Bonnie Roos, Alex Hunt & Ursula K. Heise (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2010): 17-31.

places. [...]he old, fixed and fabricated order will be disrupted, fractured and partly transformed by strong natural environmental forces [...].<sup>3</sup>

However, her binary abstraction simplifies the conflict to the transgression of static culture by dynamic nature, space versus time,<sup>4</sup> neglecting how heterogeneous the cultural realm is, and that the 'forces of nature', the river and the body, are 'cultivated' as well. Ammu's choices of a husband and lover are motivated at least as much by her resistance to social circumstances as by 'natural' desire.<sup>5</sup> Roy reveals that colonial history repeats itself to some extent in independent India. She gives numerous examples of how desire can transgress and subvert the social order or paradoxically transgress and assert it: a colonial Englishman abuses an Indian boy, and a lower-class Indian paedophile abuses a middle-class boy; an English manager fathers children with employees, and an Indian employer sexually harasses female workers; a middle-class Indian loves a lower-class Englishwoman, and an Indian middle-class woman seduces an untouchable. Each of these inter- or intracultural relationships violates certain social boundaries of ethnicity, class, and gender, but is tolerated or even endorsed by some and resisted by others, exposing the nexus between power, desire, and the Other.

In a poststructuralist vein, Pramod K. Nayar discusses the psychological and social othering of gender and caste from the highly sophisticated perspectives of the Lacanian 'imaginary' and Derridean 'hospitality'. While the English ex-wife and her daughter are met with hospitality in the Indian family home, the divorced Indian relative Ammu, her children, and the untouchable Velutha are othered and confronted with hostility. The outcasts only find

- 3 Cynthia Carey, "The Architecture of Place in The God of Small Things," in Reading Arundhati Roy's (<The God of Small Things", ed. Carole Durix & Jean-Pierre Durix (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2002): 101.
- 4 Cynthia Carey, "The Architecture of Place," 109.
- 5 However, Arundhati Roy partly reiterates the dichotomy of culture and nature, as when she attributes "civilization's fear of nature" to the police in *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997): 308. (Further page references are in the main text.) In a Marxist reading, John Lutz explores the critical potential of the novel well but simplifies the difference between natural desire and a form of desire linked to domination and exploitation, basically inverting the cultural difference between 'pure' and 'impure' desire: Lutz, "Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 42.3 (September 2009): 57-74.

hospitality offered to the Other without a name in the History House.<sup>6</sup> One could ask whether it makes sense to attribute hospitality as a social phenomenon to an abandoned building, which the marginalized characters do not even enter.

In a more comprehensive and multi-layered postcolonial approach, Dirk Wiemann and Susan Stanford Friedman combine historical context, architecture, social divisions, and narrative representation in their readings of the novel. On the basis of a profound theory of discursive space and (hetero-)chronicity, Dirk Wiemann explores the contradiction between the construction of a symbolic, dominant order and its discrepant real and other.<sup>7</sup> Complex relationships between contradictory positions and images undo binary distinctions and dissolve the boundaries between the internal and the external, private and public spaces, textually shaped “in the trope of the chiasmus.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Susan Stanford Friedman calls for a spatial turn to the novel: a “topochronic narrative poetics” allowing the critical reader “to restore an interactive analysis of time with space.”<sup>9</sup> She draws on Bakhtin’s chronotope, Foucault’s heterotopia (1984), de Certeau’s “Spatial Stories” (1984), and Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies* (1989).<sup>10</sup> Friedman highlights the functions of material and symbolic borders as markers of difference and contact zones of crossings: “borders insist on purity, distinction, difference, but facilitate contamination, mixing, and creolization.”<sup>11</sup> Space in Roy’s novel, Friedman argues, often takes the shape of buildings “that palimpsestically inscribe the social order as it has changed over time.” Buildings, she continues,

function metonymically as heterotopic places that bring into focus the social, cultural, and political systems that form identities; set in motion the trans-

- 6 Pramod K. Nayar, “The Place of the Other: Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” in *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 33.1-2 (2007): 25-27.
- 7 Dirk Wiemann, *Genres of Modernity: Contemporary Indian Novels in English* (Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 120; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2008): 8-9, 264.
- 8 Dirk Wiemann, *Genres of Modernity*, 266.
- 9 Susan Stanford Friedman, “Spatial Poetics and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan & Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2005): 194.
- 10 Susan Stanford Friedman, “Spatial Poetics,” 192, 195-96.
- 11 Friedman, “Spatial Poetics,” 196.

gression of borders; and, in effect, generate the story, the unfolding of events which cannot, because of their anguish, be told in sequence and can only be apprehended in fragments attached to specific locations.<sup>12</sup>

Her theory is very convincing, but her concentration on space in the shape of three buildings, the Abilash Talkies, Ayemenem House, and the History House, neglects the interplay of material, social and mental forms of mobility in local and global spaces. The transcultural, spatio-temporal palimpsest of heterogeneous traditions increases opportunities for mobility and multiplies boundaries at the same time. The post-empire imaginary of the novel questions Western modernization as much as Eastern traditions, and undermines the distinction between centre and periphery without neglecting issues of repression and resistance.

In order to go beyond Friedman and expand the approach to cover phenomenological, lived space and embodied movement, the present essay draws on different aspects and concepts in Foucault's heterotopia, Soja's subjective and lived Thirdspace (1996), and de Certeau's essay "Walking in the City" (1980). Foucault concedes that internal space - phenomenological, perceived, or imagined - is fundamental. But Foucault restricts his remarks to external, lived space - more particularly, only a type that reflects and contradicts other sites.<sup>13</sup> Space, in this view, is not a neutral or empty container but a heterogeneous network of relations, a skein of points or sites connected through sets of relations.<sup>14</sup> Among the counter-sites, Foucault distinguishes between unreal utopias and real heterotopias. A few forms and functions of heterotopias are of particular relevance here: spaces of deviation segregate those who deviate from the norm, e.g., hospitals or prisons; they combine in one place several incompatible spaces, such as the movie theatre, the garden, or the zoo; they are linked to heterochrony in the sense of accumulation or transitoriness, as the museum or the festival; they have certain boundaries and rituals of entry and exit, as barracks or saunas; their functions are

to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory [...]. Or else, on the

12 Friedman, "Spatial Poetics," 199.

13 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" ("Des Espaces Autres," 1984), tr. Jay Miskowicz, in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (1986; London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2002): 231.

14 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 229-31.

contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. The latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation.<sup>15</sup>

Drawing inferences from Foucault, most of 'our ordinary lives' in private homes, public places, and at work, take their meaning and orientation from these other spaces, shifting the perspective from 'here' to 'there'. If that is the case, the individual perception and imagination of other spaces, which Foucault explicitly sidelines, in relation to 'our' sites of life here is as relevant as actually being 'there', without ignoring the difference between the imagination and the fulfilment of expectations or disillusionment. Ordinary, 'messy' life is embodied. The body is both the 'normal' site of life and subject to cultural norms. It is a site of experience (sensations, emotions), bodily processes (digestion, defecation), a permeable boundary (eating; injuries), the site of personal encounters (skin contact), and an agent positioned in space. Several of these processes are often related to moisture and smell - for example, breathing, sweating, or defecating - and these are, indeed, central aspects in the novel.

Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* includes Foucault but goes further. I take it that the individual, ordinary lives Foucault neglects would be included in Soja's complex concept of space in conjunction with society and history. Soja juxtaposes the following:

- perceived or 'empirical' space, "the absolute and relative locations of things and activities, sites and situations [... and] patterns of distribution";
- the subjective interpretation or discursive representation of "conceived or imagined geographies"; and
- "lived space" in the sense of an open "spatiality of being and becoming," marked by the trialectics of space, society, and history.<sup>16</sup>

In the social margins of 'lived space' (for example, the gendered and the 'ethnic'), Soja sees particular potential for resistance and progress.

In a more specific way, de Certeau's "theory of everyday practices, of lived space," considers "opaque mobility" itself as a form of resistance to the

15 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 232-35.

16 Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford & Malden MA : Blackwell, 1996): 74, 79, 81.

system of architecture and urban planning with its implication of observable and readable individual positions.<sup>17</sup> Walking, de Certeau elaborates, means lacking a place, “the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a pro- per [place].”<sup>18</sup> Names and symbols, often associated with memories, dreams, and local stories, may provide an “impetus of movements, like vocations and calls that turn or divert an itinerary by giving it a meaning (or a direction) (sens) that was previously unforeseen.”<sup>19</sup> The trajectories of movements form an “allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes.”<sup>20</sup>

What does this mean for our analysis of *The God of Small Things*? It has been said that the book undermines and rejects all forms of binary discrimination and boundaries, primarily those of gender and caste. I would argue, however, that the novel reveals an extremely heterogeneous network of relationships, in which distinctions remain relevant to purposes of both domination and resistance. Eliminating all sorts of distinctions and boundaries would do away with the potential of heterotopia: i.e. the imaginary or real creation of alternative spaces that compensate for ordinary life or motivate its critique and reform. In the novel, the perceived remembered and imagined space is as important as spatial practices. Embodied movements in the present evoke or are motivated by shifting and fragmentary memories of past itineraries. Memory is “that woman on the train” who

coughed up phlegm and wrapped it in twists of newspaper [...]. 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. (72)

Memory is neither here nor there: on the train, the woman is moving and sitting at the same time. In Roy’s novel, Rahel’s subliminal, psychosomatic processes bring blobs from the viscous substance of the unconscious, a non-place, to the surface. The reader needs to connect the past and present pieces

17 Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City” (“Marches dans la ville,” 1980), tr. Stephen F. Rendali, in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman & Timothy Kaposy (tr. 1984; Malden MA, Oxford & Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011): 267, 265.

18 Certeau, “Walking in the City,” 270.

19 “Walking in the City,” 271.

20 “Walking in the City,” 270.

of the puzzle with the help of the omniscient narrator's occasional excursions into conflict-ridden history and politics.

In the novel, post-Empire India appears to be a nation that is constantly on the move, diachronically and synchronically related to numerous (intercultural spaces and at the same time divided by countless boundaries. Private life with its "personal turmoil" is entangled in and metonymically mirrors "the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation" (19). Leaving and returning are two of the leitmotifs of the novel. Transcultural space does not do away with differences and boundaries but redistributes and renegotiates them, relativizing some and reinforcing others for particular purposes. As a metonym for India, the fictional Kerala can be seen as a transcultural palimpsest of diverse traditions and heterogeneous local and global relationships. Ancient Hindu traditions, Syrian Christian culture dating back to the fourth century, colonial relics and communist ideology from the nineteenth century, and postcolonial influences of the twentieth century create a conflicting set of norms and distinctions. The narrator mentions the so-called "Rice-Christians" (74), untouchables who have converted to Christianity in order to escape the Hindu caste system and destitution. This conversion allows them to resist discrimination and exploitation, offering the position of a marginal religion instead. However, they did not escape segregation, since their churches and schools remained neatly separated. In a further ironic twist, they were not entitled to social benefits to relieve untouchables in independent, democratic India, because, as Christians, they no longer belonged to that caste, which had legally been ruled out (74). Paradoxically, the fact that neither the Indian law nor Christian faith endorses the classification 'untouchable' does not keep the middle-class Christian family in the novel from actively discriminating against untouchables. In a similar fashion, the communist official in the novel, whose ideology calls for equality and proletarian solidarity, and the police officer, who represents the democratic state, are complicit in punishing a transgression of caste boundaries that they should by rights be ignoring. Susan Strehle argues that the hybrid mixing of cultures leads to an "internally diasporic" India, which the dislocated subjects in Roy's novel experience as a heterogeneous space rather than a homeland; but, as demonstrated above, the mixing of cultures also multiplies boundaries that construct and identify individuals.<sup>21</sup>

21 Susan Strehle, *Transnational Women's Fiction: Unsettling Home and Homeland* (New York: Paigraeve Macmillan, 2008): 130-31.

In the novel, the West is conceptualized as a heterotopia of Kerala. The West and its institutions establish social, economic, legal, and academic boundaries, and offer rituals of entry and exit that qualify and 'normalize' 'deviant' colonial or 'Third-World' individuals. Central characters in *The God of Small Things* use continental Europe, the UK, Canada, or the USA as privileged sites of cultural orientation, education, and social mobility. The change from colonial to postcolonial India hardly alters the cultural significance of these countries. The Western orientation temporarily suspends the pull of one's 'own' culture. Taking the long historical view, it should come as no surprise that appropriating Western culture is not a privilege of the upper echelons of society, who have the means to travel abroad, but an opportunity open to everyone in a contact zone. The way in which Western culture is used and combined with Eastern traditions may serve in acts of discrimination or of resistance. The conflicting uses of cultures are not only manifest in separate spheres or institutions, but are also played out in the streets.

The scene of the railway-crossing in the second chapter serves as a nodal point in the transcultural negotiation of power and space. The crossing would be a non-place in Augé's sense, "a negation of the notion of place," because, as a space of modern transit, it lacks significance concerning "relationships which human beings have with their own history, their natural environment and with one another."<sup>22</sup> The crossing becomes a central metonym in the novel, since it marks the struggle between maintaining and contesting boundaries. The place does not have a memorable history, but history plays an important role in the social encounters it generates.

In their family car, Uncle Chacko, the twins Rahel and Estha, their mother Ammu, and their great-aunt Baby Kochamma are on their way from the family home in Ayemenem to the cinema in Cochin in order to watch *The Sound of Music*. They have to stop at a railway-crossing, and are swamped in a protest march. The family car, an American Plymouth, the modern symbol of middle-class mobility, has to wait for a steam train, a means of mass transport introduced in the Raj. A grotesque, naked figure, who has got the worst of both worlds, presides over the crossing, perched on the milestone to Cochin: "Murlidharan, the level-crossing lunatic" (62), who ran away from home to join the Indian National Army on the side of Great Britain in Singapore. He lost his arms, his free railway pass in reward for his service and

22 Marc Augé, "Chapter 1: Non-Places," in *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture, and the Everyday*, ed. Alan Read (London: Routledge, 2000): 9.



injury, and his mind (63). The only things he owns are his keys, useless for a man without a home and arms, and a plastic bag someone put on his head. The lunatic is bodily and mentally stranded in this non-place: his service to the British Empire earned him neither a place in society nor a pension. Railway travel would have given him the same position of a displaced, out- side observer (if of a different class) as the milestone, which points towards a place but marks its absence: "The homeless, the helpless, the sick, the small and lost, all filed past his window [his eyes]" (63). The lunatic presents an uncanny double of the privileged family, who at this moment are reduced to passive observers of the marginalized. Ironically, the description of the passers-by almost fits the twins, who do not belong to the family home their divorced mother returned to.

Uncle Chacko, who runs a patriarchal regime in their family home, bolstered by his Oxford education, on display in his book-filled room and his dispensation of literary quotations, criticizes the American musical film as "an extended exercise in Anglophilia" (55). In turn, Ammu questions his high self-esteem and his abilities, gauging them by the regular crashing of the model aeroplanes that symbolize his failure. Beggars and sellers crowd around the car, attracted by conspicuous wealth and repelled by a "No" (62): Ammu, who occupies a marginal space as a divorced mother in her parents' home, is the one who suspects that a leper is trying to arouse their pity with Mercurochrome. As dependent on support as the beggar, she hastens to assert class boundaries like a "true bourgeoisie" (61), as her brother remarks.

The noisy, aggressive protest march makes the passengers roll up the windows, and tension rises in the treacherous safety bubble of the car, which becomes a trap. The combination of heat and fear make the bodily presence of those who wish to be elsewhere more palpable and vulnerable, foregrounding their similarity to others, exposed to the sun and their gaze: "Terror, sweat and talcum powder blended into a mauve paste between Baby Kochamma's rings of neck fat. Spit coagulated into little white gobs at the comers of her mouth" (79). The oncoming "river of people" reduces the cars to "islands" (65) in a congested and contested space, inverting the dynamic of mobility often attributed to the middle class. The marginalized appropriate the streets. In the past, Paravans were not "allowed to walk on public roads" (74). Now, they are disregarding public order in both a physical and a symbolic way: "The air was red with flags, which dipped and lifted as the marchers ducked under the level-crossing gate and swept across the railway tracks in a red wave" (65). Marxist unionists are marching with students and workers:

"Touchables and Untouchables" (69). The protest is less radical than it seems, because it is directed against the use of ancient caste names and exploitation, while maintaining the gender gap. The male marchers demand a considerable wage raise for men, and a lower raise in women's wages (69): thus, the male political action in the public realm reproduces the gendered division of society.

Chacko tries to allay fears among his relatives, the potential class enemy, which triggers Ammu's scathing remark: "Why not join them, comrade?" (64) He does not leave the car and yield the driver's seat to his sister. His position as "a self-proclaimed Marxist" (65) derives from his student days and is no longer compatible with his status as an employer. He only prefers to ignore class boundaries if it serves his needs. Ammu lambasts her brother's unholy alliance between Western and Eastern claims to supremacy for sexist purposes: "An Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality - a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood" (65).

Two incidents burst the bubble of the car and infringe on boundaries of class, caste, and gender: a marcher opens the door and forces Baby Kochamma to wave a red flag, and Rahel, leaning out of the window, discovers and hails their illegitimate Paravan friend, Velutha. The fat lady on the back seat is singled out for a demonstration of power. It is Baby Kochamma, who symbolizes wealth and oozes fear. She tries to make herself inconspicuous, avoids eye contact, and does not want to answer, like "a coy, frightened bride" (80). A marcher insolently addresses her as "sister," intimating solidarity (80). In response to her silence, he calls her "landlord" (80), identifying her as the class enemy. He humiliates her by forcing her to wave the flag and repeat the revolutionary slogan, then reacts to her poor performance with the con- descending, sexist remark, "Good girl" (80). Baby Kochamma reacts to the infringement of her personal space and dignity with growing fear of dispossession and a sort of siege mentality. She clings to her class privilege. Her niece shows the opposite response to the marchers, indicating naivety, but also open-mindedness.

Recognizing their Paravan employee and substitute father-figure Velutha, Rahel greets him, but he "stepped sideways and disappeared deftly into the angriness around him" (71). The adult relatives are concerned for various reasons: the familiar figure turns the anonymous protest into personal resistance to their class and caste privileges. At the same time, Ammu and her children contest these boundaries by their attraction to him, a fact that Ammu

wants to keep a secret. Velutha's reaction is characteristic of his resistance to control: he steps out of sight, which makes Chacko uncertain of his loyalty and Baby Kochamma afraid of being dispossessed. Baby Kochamma, who has refused to look into the eyes of the marchers, gives voice to the caste- and class-based attempt at containment: "We should keep an eye on him" (81). Velutha's sudden disappearance turns a repressive strategy into its opposite, since Paravans had to efface their footsteps in order to prevent the pollution of Brahmins or Syrian Christians (73-74). In sum, the railway-crossing incident reveals that each character moves or is suspended between Western and Eastern cultures. Privileged individuals employ both traditions to maintain the status quo, and underprivileged characters use Western culture in order to change their position in the struggle between social groups and within the family. In the family, the struggle for upward mobility begins with the grand- parents' Western education during the Raj. The husband enters Imperial ser- vice in India and rises to the post of director, but he foils his wife's potential career in a European orchestra in order to maintain the traditional gendered hierarchy. After his retirement without distinction, he beats his younger and energetic wife in order to put her bodily in her place, while she has carved out a space of her own, producing pickles. Her factory, which characteristically lies between the family home and the river, escapes classification, as does her produce (30), a fact that is symbolic for the family as a whole: "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how" (31). The grandmother's factory excludes her husband, who jealously polices the boundary of that space but does not enter it. The bam forms her female heterotopia outside the family mansion, until her son Chacko takes over, putting an end to domes- tic violence but also extending his rule to the pickling factory. "As a contact zone," Friedman writes, "the factory brings together not only East and West, touchables and untouchables, but also manager and communist leader."<sup>23</sup> Grudgingly, the family grants the Paravan Velutha access to the factory, suspending historical boundaries because they need his modern technical skills.

Having been disempowered by his son, the father destroys his own favourite rocking chair - and his own privileged place in the family home. He buys a car, which he drives wearing a three-piece woollen suit, creating a compensatory heterotopia for himself where he can mimic the English gentleman and display symbolic and economic capital. The car allows him to get away from

23 Friedman, "Spatial Poetics," 200.

his family, only to cruise aimlessly and return to the place of his deposition at night. Thus, his later life reveals an uncanny resemblance to Velutha's existence, since both move without leaving traces, turning marginal existence into a space of protest, albeit to opposite ends.

England, the 'mother country', remains an important reference point for the younger generation. Chacko studies at Oxford. Owing to the quality of its teaching, its limitation on access, and its initiation rituals, the university easily fulfils the criteria of a heterotopia. However, the promise of entry into the upper echelons of British or Indian society is frustrated. Chacko encounters conflicts of gendered, economic, social, and ethnic stratification. As an Oxonian, Chacko attracts the attention of the waitress Margaret because of his 'exotic' background, knowledge, and appearance of upward mobility (241, 245). However, he is rejected by her lower-class English parents. While Margaret is out working, Chacko stays at home but neglects domestic duties. Chacko cannot find his place in this inverted segregation of spheres. Margaret finds a new partner and divorces him. Unable to find a suitable position in England, Chacko returns and establishes the 'enlightened' patriarchal rule denied to him abroad.

It seems that the only use to which Chacko can put his education is to demonstrate superiority through erudition, symbolically placing himself above others, a position endorsed by his social status as a propertied heir. However, Chacko's alternately pompous and pensive "Oxford moods" (54) signify his alienation from the family. His books fulfil the same function as his father's car: a space that promises vicarious participation in English culture and enables suspension of relationships with the family circle. That is why Chacko understands the colonial legacy in his father's and his own anglophilia. But he also stresses the negative effects in terms of an alienation from history, their country, and themselves: "Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (52). In a state of "postcolonial melancholia," Chacko considers anglophiles to be the untouchables of the colonial English and postcolonial Indians.<sup>24</sup> When Chacko pities himself as a marginalized character, he ignores the value he places on his education at Oxford, on his marriage to a white Englishwoman, and "his family's complicity with the colonizer."<sup>25</sup> Chacko expresses a lack of orientation and belonging through

24 Wiemann, *Genres of Modernity*, 269.

25 Strehle, *Transnational Women's Fiction*, 133.

the use of metaphors of uncertain perception, manipulated subconscious, and literal exclusion from the house of history:

“we’ve been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering [...]. Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere.” (53)

This view of his victimization belies his own pretence to superiority - on the basis of the anglophile tradition - and his egocentric manipulation of literal and metaphorical boundaries and relationships.

Chacko displaces not only his father as the head of the family but also his mother as the head of the pickle business. He plays multiple roles at the same time, abusing his position of power. As “a self-proclaimed Marxist” (65), he wilfully collapses cultural and material distances when he makes his female employees share his table and compels them to sleep with him. For that purpose, his complicit mother has an extra door built from his room to the garden. His heterotopia of sexual pleasure is certainly seen in a less favorable light by the women of the pickle factory, many of whom are married. The fact that the ‘comrade’ pays the women workers less than the minimal wage makes them more dependent on extra money for sexual services. Chacko’s positioning as an Oxonian and landlord, son and patriarch, boss and comrade, philanthropist and philanderer, ab/uses boundaries of cultures, class, and gender: the versatile performer has his cake and eats it, too, because he can exploit the multiple boundary-lines available in transcultural space.

Chacko’s aunt Baby Kochamma embodies the postwar re-orientation from Great Britain towards the US A as a centre of cultural gravitation. In her teens, her love of a Jesuit monk, the Irish Father Mulligan, displays a passionate version of anglophilia. Love makes her even convert to Roman Catholicism and join a convent in Madras, turning away from the Syrian Christian fold of her father to another marginal heterotopia. However, her ‘devotion’ and wilful segregation from her family fails to secure the monk’s attention. Her father sends her to college in the USA; she gains a degree in ‘Ornamental Gardening’, which fulfils a similar, albeit less prestigious, function to Chacko’s education in literature. Upon her return, she cultivates the garden as a compensatory and transcultural heterotopia of her own. Imitating neocolonial consumerism and taste, she acquires plants from all over the world and sculptures (of diminutive men), a peeing cherub and gnomes with rosy cheeks and peaked red caps (26), substituting for the man of her dreams in the brown cassock. Ironically, the Hindu convert Mulligan’s and Baby Kochamma’s

immersion in other cultures makes each appropriate the other's culture to some extent, which alienates them from each other because they move in opposite directions. Dirk Wiemann points out that Baby Kochamma's policing of the domestic boundaries is contradicted by the invasion of global media - as well as dirt and insects.<sup>26</sup> As Chacko's manoeuvring reveals, transcultural space affords many options for straddling and sustaining boundaries at the same time. Baby Kochamma neglects both the garden and the house when she acquires satellite television. She ignores the "communist patcha" in her back yard because she "presided over the World in her drawing room on satellite TV" (27). Her 'Television worries' (28) about famines and the dispossessed revive her fears of a Marxist revolution and make her lock the windows and doors. She has the whole world at her fingertips - and her cook, Maria Kochu, who watches television with her. To some extent, Maria respects class distinctions, sitting on the floor next to Baby Kochamma's armchair, but they eat nuts from the same dish, and sometimes their hands touch (88). Sharing the global mediascape 'democratizes' Indian society in some way and may expose social distinctions in India as arbitrary constructs, but the spatial 'closing of the ranks' between Baby Kochamma and Maria Kochu is only illusory. They do not face each other but the television set, which provides their major orientation, to the detriment of local culture, and the aunt even locks the door of her fridge in distrust of the cook (29). Participation remains virtual for the subaltern woman; the privileged woman clings to her strategies of othering. However, Baby Kochamma's obsession with locking everything turns the 'room of her own' into a suffocating tomb, as does the abandoned car outside for the trapped bird.

Baby Kochamma's orientation towards Western culture is egocentric and instrumental, as is her policing of the boundaries of gender and caste when she discriminates against her niece Ammu. Transgressing ethnic boundaries in order to fulfil gendered ones, Ammu has married a Bengali Hindu outside her community. What is worse, she soon divorces her alcoholic husband, and has to return with two children to her tyrannical father. Both Baby Kochamma and Ammu become a burden to the family, but Ammu openly defies boundaries by starting a love affair with the untouchable Velutha. Since Baby Kochamma herself has yearned to transgress boundaries, she does not necessarily serve as a conservative guardian of Indian traditions. Instead, she employs - and violates - cultural conventions strategically in order to displace

26 Dirk Wiemann, *Genres of Modernity*, 267-68.

her rival for family funding. She blatantly lies by claiming that the Paravan has raped her niece and she manipulates Chacko to oust her niece from the family home. In contrast to Chacko's sexual transgression, the deviant woman's transgression is punished by exclusion.

Next to the Paravan Velutha, the youngest generation in the book is the most mobile due to both social pressure and their resistance. As children of a divorced mother and a cross-ethnic marriage, and as imperfectly anglicized children, Estha and Rahel fail to fit any norm. In-between multiple positions, they are subject to various push-and-pull factors. A traumatic childhood experience becomes symptomatic of their lives: "They remembered being pushed around a room once, from Ammu to Baba to Ammu to Baba like billiard balls" (84). Rahel and Estha feel alternately loved and rejected by their mother; after the divorce, Estha is returned a few times from one parent to the other. They suffer from "diasporic double-consciousness" because, as "Half-Hindu Hybrids" (45), they are not exactly welcome in the 'Christian' Ayemenem house.<sup>27</sup> However, the marginalized children roam the compound beyond the boundaries of caste and class. They find a substitute home at Velutha's forbidden place near the river. Velutha serves as a father figure, teaching them wood-carving and fishing. He also serves as a mother figure, cooking curries, and as a friend, playing with them. The children find a heterotopia at the margins of the family estate as opposed to the anglophile heterotopia of the cinema, which is highly attractive but disillusioning.

The European family in their favourite movie, *The Sound of Music*, is a model of immaculate Austrian propriety and conjugal happiness from which the Indian family clearly deviates, a contrast compounded by a detailed scene of the Indian family urinating in the toilet of the *Abhilash Talkies*. Instead of having a compensatory function, the film makes the children disillusioned with their dysfunctional family. In addition, the abuse of Estha violates heterosexual, moral, and class norms, shocking the middle-class boy and fulfilling the subaltern's deviant sexual need: the seedy employee, who does not or must not indulge in the celluloid illusion, creates his own heterotopia of desire. The fact that the paedophile threatens to track Estha down if the boy reveals the abuse triggers something like a persecution complex, the boy's feeling that he is nowhere at home, and his yearning for a safe haven.

Refusing male norms, Estha devotes himself to domestic work and renders himself "inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye. [...] Estha occupied

<sup>27</sup> Strehle, *Transnational Women's Fiction*, 137.

very little space in the world" (10-11). He has retreated into utter silence and into a meticulously clean room in the family home, a heterotopia of seclusion like a convent. Rahel shares her brother's refusal to assume a conventional role in social discourse and practice. She is dismissed from Nazareth Convent for unruly behaviour, drops out of the College of Architecture, and drifts "into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge" (18). After her divorce, she works as a cashier at the 'non-place' of a petrol station. Married as an exotic Other by an American and addressed as a sexual object, Rahel is alienated from both marriage and American society. Protected but 'arrested' behind her bullet-proof window, she becomes an eye-witness of crime, in an echo of the TV news *Baby Kochamma* watches. Rahel's drifting and Estha's daily random walks refuse to imitate their grandfather's and their uncle's drive for upward mobility. Like Estha's walking, Rahel's drifting is indicative of "the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper [place]."<sup>28</sup> The displaced siblings move to a marginal 'Thirdspace' as a form of resistance.

The twins' sexual intimacy does not bridge the silence between them. Although their bodies seem to fit each other perfectly, I would question the optimistic claim made by Almeida and Fox of a healing encounter.<sup>29</sup> It looks like an act of despair rather than love, and a coupling of two drifting souls who get lost together in defiance of social rules. It is ironic that this happens right under the nose of *Baby Kochamma*, who voyeuristically indulges in the show *Prime Bodies* on TV. Almeida stresses "the body's potential for transgression in the very locus of its oppression," suggesting that the transgression functions as a political act directed against patriarchal constraints, which *Baby Kochamma* defends in the end.<sup>30</sup>

For the young twins, their mother, and Velutha, the river and the plantation beyond form the liminal counter-spaces to their family homes. Ecocriticism interprets this river as a place and symbol of economic, social, and ecological

28 Certeau, "Walking in the City," 270.

29 Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida, "Untouchable Bodies: Arundhati Roy's Corporeal Transgressions," *Il ha do Desterro: A Journal of Language and Literature* 42 (2002): 269.

30 Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida, "Untouchable Bodies," 271; L. Chris Fox, "A Martyrology of the Subject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 33.3-4 (July 2002): 55.



failure as it changes from a playground to a cesspool.<sup>31</sup> However, it is far more than a sign of decline. Like the level-crossing, this river forms a highly complex space in literal and metaphorical terms. In a more comprehensive way, the river represents a border, a threshold, an organic body of its own, a site, and a network of relationships. The river forms the 'natural' boundary between the family estate and the abandoned colonial mansion on a rubber plantation, separating the 'pure' family home and the corrupt colonial mansion, which had been the site of paedophile exploitation. The river forms a contact zone connecting the two banks as sites of the postcolonial present and the colonial past, Brahmins and untouchables, men and women, adults and children, people fishing, washing themselves, or defecating. Fresh water mixes with salt water, local with global cultures that arrive via the oceans. It is a place of risk; it is beyond control, until dammed in order to keep out salt water and use the freshwater outflow for rice paddies; a procedure, however, which at times turns the river into a foul cesspool. The limitation of movement and exchange impedes life. Like the characters' lives, the river changes with the tides and the seasons, flows at a different pace at different times, and has invisible currents. In its multiple features, the river forms an ideal image and space for the versatile Velutha. Velutha floats and swims in the river, catches fish, eats and sleeps on the river bank in order to escape his narrowminded father (76-77). With his carpentry skills acquired from a German, his technical expertise, and his self-confidence, Velutha goes beyond his inferior position as a Paravan. He leaves no traces (77), whether walking in the streets or swimming in the river. Water connects him to Ammu with her "liquid ache" and "midnight swims" (44). Her unpredictable way of walking (44) is as unconventional as Velutha's (76). The liminal riverbank offers an opportunity for these marginalized individuals to embrace for the first time.

Velutha and Ammu literally and metaphorically cross the line when they continue to meet at night in the abandoned colonial mansion across the river. The 'History House' is a heterotopia of deviance - in Foucault's sense of both licence and discipline. Here, the paedophile British Sahib kills himself after losing his Indian lover, and the police maim the sleeping Velutha, reinforcing ancient conventions of caste by mutilating the body as an agent and site of illicit pleasure:

31 Compare Amitabh Roy, *The God of Small Things: A Novel of Social Commitment* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2005): 128-44.

the body is the initial site upon which the spatial meanings of the social order are written. The body is the primal border, the first space of passionate connection and violent disconnection.<sup>32</sup>

Ironically, in order to restore the boundary between touchables and untouchables, the policemen reiterate the physical contact forbidden and motivated by the caste system. The police literally reduce Velutha's body to the abject (in Kristeva's sense) that they project on him: saliva, blood, pus, and faeces with a strange "smell" (6): "Sicksweet" (32). The police finally dis- pose of his body in a paupers' pit, effacing any visible trace of it, inverting Velutha's 'opaque mobility' as a form of resisting control. Ammu herself is also rendered invisible by her contact with Velutha. She is consigned to a boarding house and contracts asthma, as if choking on social restrictions. She feels cast out and exposed "like a road-sign with birds shitting on her" (161), a statement that recalls the crippled character at the non-place of the railway-crossing. The "liquid ache [...of desire beyond] the morality of motherhood and divorcehood" has motivated her transgression, and she ultimately chokes on phlegm (160-61): like the damming of the river and the rigidity of social customs, the obstruction of vital processes leads to decay.<sup>33</sup> Ammu's illness and her subsequent rejection by her daughter (161) are instances of 'abjection'. hence a parallel to Velutha's end.<sup>34</sup>

Friedman rightly points out that the novel addresses "colonial domination, postcolonial angst, and transnational corporate tourism" as well as the Indian history of repression.<sup>35</sup> The neocolonial conversion of the colonial mansion and plantation into a heterotopic luxury resort constructs a nostalgic post-Empire imaginary for international consumption. The "Heritage" hotel offers modern convenience and sells Indian traditions on its compound of historical buildings, which were dismantled elsewhere. However, Friedman neglects the various ways in which the novel addresses mutual problems and shared interests beyond divisive domination and angst. The novel unfolds a post-Empire imaginary from below in the recognition of equality and solidarity among the

32 Friedman, "Spatial Poetics," 202; Almeida arrives at a similar argument in "Untouchable Bodies," 259: Roy questions the gendered and racial body politic and considers the body as mediator of cultural exchange and a means of transgression.

33 Almeida specifies in detail the gendered and the racial practices of repression, subjecting the bodies of illegitimate pleasure to pain ("Untouchable Bodies," 265-66).

34 Thanks go to Virginia Richter for this observation.

35 Friedman, "Spatial Poetics," 203.

marginalized. In a very basic way, the wall separating the holiday resort from ordinary slum life cannot keep out the foul smell wafting up from the river. This smell reminds everyone of the abject in all bodies. Something is foul in the state of Kerala: the neat separation of pure and polluted, manifested in conceptions of caste, gender, and class, is asserted by some individuals and transgressed by virtually all others for particular purposes, questioning or reasserting the social hierarchy. Countering the strategic use of boundaries and othering, the abject Other is revealed to be a part of the Self.<sup>36</sup> On a positive note, the non-place of the railway-crossing and the liminal heterotopia of the river invite recognition of equality and solidarity across boundaries in opposition to the restrictive, middle-class heterotopic institutions of the convent, the college, the university, or the 'fortress' of the house that Baby Kochamma constructs. Considering the novel as a whole, the railway-crossing and the river serve as metonyms for the changing life of Kerala. They are 'Third-spaces' of resistance and becoming in Soja's sense, where the marginalized appropriate empowering discourses and invert restrictive sociohistorical models of mobility.

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36 L. Chris Fox notes that the untouchables, who deal with human waste, are a prime example of the social abject ("Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," 36).

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