Arundhati Roy: The God of Small Things (1997)

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Genre: Novel. Country: India, United Kingdom.

The God of Small Things was written by Arundhati Roy, who was trained as an architect, is married and a mother of two children, writes film scripts and engages in social and environmental projects as a political activist. Her first and to date only novel, published in 1997 on the 50th anniversary of Indian independence, won the Booker Prize in the same year and has enjoyed an immense worldwide success, having been translated in about 40 languages. The multifaceted novel appeals to a wide audience because it is about hope and disillusionment in a family over three generations in "exotic" Southern India, and because it is mysterious, historical, poetic, postcolonial and postmodern all at the same time. However, its great popular and academic acclaim has not gone without criticism. Marta Dvorak argues that the novel, written in English, criticizes repression in India and global U.S. hegemony while profiting from commodifying an exoticised version of India for Western taste in a global market (2002, 43-44, 48-49). The question is whether an Indian writer has to represent and address an "Indian point of view", whatever that may be in a multicultural nation of one billion.

Indeed, the response to the novel in India has been vigorous but mixed. Transgressing the rules regulating sexuality, gender and caste in the novel (by featuring incest, explicit scenes of sexual intercourse between members of different castes, domestic violence etc.) and exposing the pervasive discrimination against untouchables by party officials and the police has triggered public protest and some adverse academic criticism in India, but to some extent Indian literary scholars share the rather favourable attitude of Western critics (Durix 2002, 8-11; Prasad 2003). For example, Amitabh Roy (2005) locates the novel in a short but significant tradition of political Indian literature and praises its critical response to very specific social and economic circumstances relating to women, children, and untouchables, whose real situation in many cases violates their fundamental rights laid down in the Indian constitution.

An overview of the story of failed hopes and lives skirts the functional aesthetic impact of the mysterious and fragmented novel, but does provide some orientation. The novel starts with the 31-year-old Rahel's return to the small town of Ayemenem in 1992 after her failed marriage in the U.S. She meets with the cold comfort offered by her old aunt, "Baby" Kochamma, and the impenetrable wall of silence her fraternal twin brother Esthappen has wrapped around himself. Rahel's return triggers memories of her mother, and two

weeks in her childhood which changed their lives forever and traumatized the children, whose perspectives are privileged among others in the third-person narrative. Their trauma leads to repression, and the return of the repressed intrudes upon the present, motivating the fragmented and repetitive narrative with many instances of retrospection and foreshadowing (Delourme 2002, 145-47, 153-56). Rahel's grandfather Benaan John Ipe, a "Syrian Christian" and dedicated imperial entomologist, has not received any recognition for his (accidental) discovery a new kind of
moth. Upon retirement, he takes out his frustration on his wife, who has built up a pickle factory after her husband checked her potential career as a talented violinist. They send their son Chacko to Oxford, but are too poor to pay the dowry for their daughter Ammu, who tries to escape from domestic violence by marrying a Bengali Hindu without asking for parental consent. Ammu soon leaves her abusive and alcoholic husband and returns to her parents' home, being burdened by shame and two children of mixed descent. She shares the position of a dependent relative with her unmarried aunt, Baby Kochamma, who has nurtured a lifelong love for an Irish monk beyond her reach and resents her divorced niece for reasons of propriety and rivalry for support from their family. The chaotic and lazy Chacko returns to his parents' home after his failed marriage with the English waitress Margaret, who comes for a visit with their daughter Sophie after the death of her second husband. Chacko ends his father's abuse and assumes control at home but runs down the pickle factory. A series of traumatic events haunts the children. Esthappen is sexually abused in a cinema and is afraid that the paedophile will track him down. Their mother's clandestine and passionate encounters with a talented employee and the children's father figure, Velutha, are discovered and scandalize the family, particularly because he is an untouchable. Baby Kochamma wrongly accuses Velutha of rape in order to protect the family from further shame and take revenge on Ammu. Sophie drowns as the children cross the river in a boat at night in order to escape to an abandoned house, which is the place where Velutha is virtually beaten to death by the police before their eyes. In addition to witnessing the horror, the children are manipulated to wrongly accuse Velutha of kidnapping and murder in order to cover up his death in police custody. The aunt makes Chacko send Esthappen back to his father and kick Ammu out; she dies alone of asthma and in poverty. Upon Rahel's return after university and years of drifting, she notices Baby Kochamma's degeneration into a television addict, who has neglected the dilapidated house and garden, an emblem of the disintegration of the family. Rahel tries to re- establish contact with her brother, whose autistic silence protects him from heaping more guilt upon himself by saying the wrong things, and whose compulsion for immaculate cleanliness tries to get rid of the pollution inflicted upon him by childhood sexual abuse.

The novel takes a critical perspective on caste and gender and debunks the patriarchal claim to superiority, but refrains from idealizing women (Amitabh Roy 2005, 74; Lutz 2009, 57-74). Many men in the family are weak characters who prop up their self-esteem through dominating and abusing women. Even if Chacko protects his mother from his father's violence, he deprives her of the management of the pickle factory and compels female workers to serve his sexual pleasure (Prasad 2003, 109-11). The untouchable Velutha with his talent, warm-heartedness, and self-confidence is the idealized exception among the male characters. The capable grandmother submits to her husband's beatings but maintains a rigid sense of superiority in terms of class and caste over Chacko's first wife and Velutha. Baby Kochamma rebels against her family by converting to Roman Catholicism, but schemes

against her divorced niece. In words and acts, Ammu defies the discrimination against women and untouchables. Her initiative in selecting a Bengali husband and an untouchable lover transgresses cultural, gendered, and caste rules. Roy further undermines caste distinctions of purity and pollution by reiterating phlegm, urine, faeces, and blood in scenes with various characters, a strategy which culminates in detailing overtly the sexual encounter between Ammu and Velutha (Fox 2002, 35-60).

The novel abounds with – often ironic – intermedial and intercultural references from Great Britain, the United States and India. Paradoxically, appropriation, mixing and hybridity seem to be the rule rather than the exception in spite of the policing of boundaries (cp. Oumhani 2000, 85-91). In individual instances, British literature serves Chacko as support in bouts of melancholy and pompous poses, and Ammu as a means of creating a bond of affection with her children. American culture, music and film serve as hallmarks of (mis-)identification in the shape of a sky-blue Plymouth car, Elvis Presley, The Sound of Music, and contemporary Hollywood productions. In structural terms, Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness informs the past and the present of tabooed desire in the History House, in which a paedophile English owner, who had gone native, abused boys, and where Ammu and Velutha enjoy passionate encounters (cp. Durix 2002, 17-19). However, the History House also becomes a site of haunting punishments, where the paedophile commits suicide and the untouchable is beaten to pulp. Thus, the forces of order and civilization, which Conrad considered as relevant constraints, are lethal and appear to be at least as problematic as the passions they repress. Dvorak finds fault with the fact that Roy, while criticizing the fact that Indian culture is trivialized to entertain Western tourists, reproduces this strategy in simplifying an episode of Kathakali dance as a foil for events in the novel (2002, 50-52). Alex Tickell takes a more balanced view when he explains that Roy is fully aware of what she is doing by doubling the scene in her novel, revealing the difference between the brief show to Western hotel guests for survival, and the long performance to an indigenous audience in the temple (2003, 73-89). After all, the need to perform for tourists also suggests that traditional Hindu culture does not necessarily pay in multicultural modern India.

The God of Small Things has often been compared with Salman Rushdie's novels and sometimes found derivative in terms of complexity and style (Dvorak 2002, 45-47; Lane 2006, 97). Roy has certainly read Rushdie and also gives voice to marginalized characters, whose hopes, loves and "little lives" are also affected by history, culture, and politics. However, she does not aspire to an encyclopaedic panorama of Indian society but restricts her scene to a small Syrian-Christian community in Kerala with its ancient and hybrid mixing of Christian faith and Hindu caste. Instead of employing Salman Rushdie's staggering magic realism, Roy motivates the vision of the surreal through dreams and the fusion of reality and imagination in children's minds. Dvorak concedes that Roy employs a virtuoso style, flourishing capitalization, extravagant similes, mixed metaphors, neologism, enumeration and amplification, montage, repetition and fragmentation, but the critic depreciates the "stylistic acrobatics" as postmodern play without a specific function (2002, 43, 46-47, 61). Other critics read the disruptive play with language as resistance to the colonial legacy of the imperial lingo. Sandhya Patel takes a third position as she stresses the hybrid function of language and identity in the novel. She rightly argues that the fascination with British English is as important as resistance to it, for example in the use of Western imagery and skirting of Indian idioms or rhythms, and in the children's play with the sounds

and meanings of words (2008, 227-243). However, Patel's conclusion that the lack of Indian inflections amounts to a lack of defamiliarization (235) goes too far since the children's wordplay and disruptive use of words certainly create a fresh perspective on English, motivated both through their lack of understanding the threatening adult world and their "partial" attention to the strange and "funny" second language (Vogt-William 2003, 393-404; Lane 2006, 99). Lane stresses that the playful montage and the oral, poetic quality of the language transgresses the rigid rules of the social order expressed in its linear representation (2006, 106-107). Due to its entertaining quality, social criticism and aesthetic complexity, the novel has stimulated more academic response than can be summarized here, and it will probably continue to do so in the future.

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