

‘In the Days When the Love Laws Were Made’

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

AFTER HAVING READ ARUNDHATI ROY’S story *The God of Small Things*, these words raise a number of questions in my mind; questions of the meaning of history, tradition and modernity, of law and of love, of society and the individual human being — in a country that I think I have come to know a little over a period of more than thirty



years. I am well aware that to know a country even ‘a little’ is a highly pretentious statement, not the least because the India that is meant here is a mental construct, an intellectual abstraction that has to be translated into a myriad of concrete space-time shapes to give it meaning. Into that of Kerala in the 1960s and 1990s, for example; or more precisely, into a small Kerala village community. A community like Ayemenem, near Kottayam, where the story’s fateful events take place during a fortnight at the end of 1969; events that would forever affect the lives of a Syrian-Christian family.

I also ask myself, whether having visited several parts of Kerala in the past will help me towards answering my questions. Or perhaps, my having read other stories from and about Kerala. For example, Meena Alexander’s autobiography *Fault Lines*, which introduced me to a particular social segment of the Syrian-Christian community. Or the first part of Salman Rushdie’s *The Moore’s Last Sigh* with its portrayal of a coastal, urban, pluralistic religious society and its twentieth century economic and cultural history. Or Thakazhi’s *Chemmeen*, the famous fisherman story of many years ago, which was turned into a film and is mentioned in Roy’s novel. (218) Or finally, Kamala Das’s stories and poems which have

certainly opened windows for me, especially her “An Introduction” and “My Grandmother’s House”.

Taking my cue from Das’s texts as well as from several of her love poems and relating them to *The God of Small Things*¹, it does not seem far-fetched then to suggest that independent-minded women writers from Kerala like Kamala Das, Meena Alexander or Arundhati Roy have been concerned with the fate especially of the young woman, and her relationship to society — or to return to Roy’s phrase, to the ‘love laws’ decreed in the past but still valid and ruthlessly put into effect even today, as the novel’s story illustrates.

At the end of the introductory chapter, “Paradise Pickles & Preserves”, the narrator reflects upon the time frame of her story (which we do not yet know in all its details). Distinguishing between the actual story to be told “for practical purposes, in a hopelessly practical world ...” (34) that does not cover more than two weeks, and its historically representative meaning she suggests:

to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it.

Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago [...] before Marxism came [...] the British [...] the Dutch [...] It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag.

That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made.

The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.

And how much. (33)

The historical perspective invoked here touches upon two interesting aspects, a socio-cultural dimension and a political-aesthetic one, to which I shall turn later. Its socio-cultural reference suggests a fissure between the history of Christianity in South India and ‘Love’. Christ’s dictum, “love thy neighbour as thyself”, we are meant to understand, has perhaps never really taken root in the Syrian-Christian community’s socio-religious make-up. On the contrary. *The God of Small Things*, I think, ‘argues’ that Christian love in its several forms — God’s love and human conjugal, parental, brotherly and sisterly, neighbourly and sexual love — have come to be regulated and subjugated by the ‘love laws’; by such rules, to be more precise, that govern interpersonal relations and were instituted and sanctioned during the pre-Christian era

¹ Arundhati, Roy, *The God of Small Things*, London: Flamingo/Harper Collins 1998. All further references are to this edition.

in Kerala; in sum, by a remarkably resilient conception and practice of love insisted-upon and applied ever since, which would denounce, reject and, if the need arose, simply annihilate any alternative idea and practice of love in any religious community, including that of the Syrian-Christians.

In an interesting excursion into the history of the relationship of Christianity and casteism (which is, after all, the 'love laws' site), the narrator supplies evidence of their supreme power. The conversion of untouchables to Christianity did not remove their social stigma and make them 'brothers in Christ'. On the contrary: "They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop." (74)

The God of Small Things demonstrates the virtually unbroken tradition and almost unquestioned rule of these 'love laws' in the configuration of a conflict between their defenders and their challengers. As for the constellation of its adverse parties, the logic of this conflict obviously demands typifying those who unquestioningly defend the immutability of tradition. Their opponents, on the other hand, would have to be more individualized, as they are modern, questioning, even doubting human beings, who suffer from contradictory pulls — desires, emotions and views — in their search for a personal identity beyond the constriction of the 'love laws'. Thus on one side of the dividing line we meet Baby Kochamma, a spinster of almost sixty years of age, who is the perhaps outstanding, although not the only advocate of the 'love laws'. I would go even further and maintain that the narrator foregrounds Baby Kochamma's physical appearance, her views, reflections, feelings and generally scheming nature to such an extent that she at times turns out as a caricature of herself. On the opposite side we find her niece Ammu, twenty-seven years old, divorced and the mother of the twins Esthappen Yako and Rahel. She is the central antagonist in the struggle against the 'love laws' and the most individualized of all the characters.

As far as stereotyping is concerned, I note, of course, the narrator's (and implied author-narrator's) obvious rejection of — and suffering from! — pre-Christian, that is to say, Hindu-based and caste-grounded perception of interpersonal relationships. A perception which I similarly reject because I believe that it is an ideological construct that serves, first and foremost, the maintenance of power by those who wield it: the upper over the lower castes; caste members over untouchables; man over woman and children; the wealthy over the poor. But I am also aware of the danger of being too easily manipulated by the narrator's tendency to stereotype her figures; and aware, similarly, of the danger of too quickly identifying with her

critical stance towards, for example, Baby Kochamma who, after all, is not a demon but a *human being*. There is then the need on the reader's part of perceiving of her as a *literary construct* that serves the narrator's purpose of examining the roots of the 'love laws' and of exposing their anti-human nature. Which, incidentally, reminds me of the narrator's likewise sceptical investigation into that brand of Marxism that is professed by Comrade Pillai when Velutha approaches him for help:

'... Comrade [he said], you should know that Party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life.'

Velutha watched Comrade Pillai's body fade from the door. His disembodied, piping voice stayed on and sent out slogans. Pennants fluttering in an empty doorway.

*It is not in the Party's interest to take up such matters.
Individuals' interest is subordinate to the organization's interest.
Violating Party Discipline means violating Party Unity.*

The voice went on. Sentences disaggregated into phrases. Words.
[...]

And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature. (287)

As this passage illustrates, Baby Kochamma is not the only typified figure in the narrative. Others, too, are ostensibly meant to serve the same function of exposing 'the religion' of the 'love laws'. Comrade K.N.M. Pillai shuts the door on Velutha because the young man's 'indiscipline' in his private life neither serves his own political ambitions nor his business interests. As the master of his house he addresses his wife with 'edi' (or 'hey, you', as the narrator helpfully explains to the non-Malayalam speaker and reader). He makes his niece Latha and son Lenin obediently rattle off English literary texts to impress the visitor, memorized words which they neither understand nor pronounce intelligibly. And he orders 'edi' around to serve the men, stay in the background and hold her tongue. Similarly typified characters are Inspector Thomas Mathew; or a "posse of Touchable Policemen [...] A cartoonplatoon" (304) of six men who catch sleeping Velutha and kick him to death; or Velutha's father Vellya Paapen who has totally internalised the 'love laws', gives his son's illicit relationship with Ammu away to Mammachi and even waits for Velutha to kill him, because

he had dared to humiliate the very family who had given “his father, Kelan, title to the land on which their hut now stood.” (255)

Various Ipe-family members are drawn as types filling out traditional social and gender roles. Benaan John Ipe or Pappachi, Ammu’s father, rules his household like a tyrant, and neither his educational background nor his respectable professional position prevent him from beating up his wife and daughter — though not his son — regularly and ruthlessly. Mammachi, suffering wife, is the doting Indian mother of a son for whom she has a special entrance built to the house to facilitate the visit of his women who, after all, minister to “a Man’s needs.” (168) Yet after she has heard of her daughter’s affair with an untouchable, which triggers off a vividly detailed fantasized picture of their love act, she

nearly vomited. *Like a dog with a bitch on heat.* Her tolerance of ‘Men’s Needs’ as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of breeding [...] and brought the family to its knees. [...]

Mammachi lost control. (258)

Finally, her son Chacko, who long ago had just managed to pass his exam at Balliol College in Oxford, but had thereafter failed in almost every other respect, including in his marriage to Sophie Mol’s English mother Margaret, and now in running the family pickle factory. Though he can discuss history, hates to admit that they “were a *family* of Anglophiles” (52), and teaches the twins to understand difficult English words, he has turned — or returned — into the stereotypical Indian family man. In charge of the Ipe-household he asserts his position whenever he can. Thus he cynically puts his sister down by telling her, “‘What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine’”, since “as a daughter [she] had no claim to property.” (57)

Set against this range of stereotyped figures there is, as I have said, Ammu, portrayed as an individual character. I would also include the three children Estha, Rahel and Sophie Mol and, to some degree, Velutha. Ammu’s individuality rests in her double role as the searching and lonely antagonist and the acting protagonist of the final part of the narrative. She antagonizes her family by marginalizing herself socially: escapes from her parents’ home as a young woman; marries a man of her own choice and separates from him after only a few years. Once in Ayemenem, she widens the rift by constantly challenging her elder brother’s views and attitudes and by keeping distant from her mother and her aunt. When she suddenly realizes her love for Velutha and does not hesitate to enter into a tabooed

relationship with him, a Paravan employed by her mother, it is this single act of Ammu's breaking society's 'love laws' that causes their defenders to react and that pushes the narrative to its climax. She herself may not always be free of stereotypical views, for example in her critique of others as social conformists or of men as male chauvinists. Yet such accusations protect her and hide her loneliness, her homelessness. She does indeed never find and never have a home. Like other family members who for a time had lived elsewhere — Pappachi, Baby Kochamma and Chacko — Ammu's move to Ayemenem initially appears as her homecoming, although being a divorced woman with children does not make her really welcome. Ironically, she finally finds her home in 'The History House': the deserted and dilapidating house of the "Black Sahib. The Englishman who had 'gone native'" (52); which later becomes the refuge of the children and finally the place where Velutha is murdered.

The three children are not yet old enough to have become aware of the question of individual identity, but it is Roy's gift of credibly portraying their childlike nature which endows them with individuality. As grown-up people, twenty-three years after Ammu's and Velutha's love was destroyed, I still recognize Estha and Rahel as individual personalities, albeit as totally changed ever since the children were forced by Baby Kochamma to 'admit' Velutha's alleged crime of having abducted and then murdered Sophie Mol. Estha's mental disturbance, I feel, sets in when the "Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said Yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt." (320) Taking leave from Ammu and Rahel and being 'Returned' to his father on Chacko's orders, Estha "left his voice behind" (326) at the Cochin Harbour Terminus, never to see his mother again and never to speak a word after his 're-Return' to Ayemenem twenty-three years later, sometime in 1993. Rahel, just back from America at Baby Kochamma's request to look after her brother, had at the time of departure "doubled over and screamed and screamed" on the station platform. (326) Her life has since been empty without her twin brother, without Ammu who had died a few years later, and with her own aimless drifting from place to place. But being now together again, sisterly and brotherly love re-asserts itself against the 'love laws' — which would, of course, forbid their lying together :

she sat up and put her arms around him. Drew him down
beside her.
They lay like that for a long time. Awake in the dark. Quietness
and Emptiness.
Not old. Not young.
But a viable, die-able age.

[...]

But what was there to say?

Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. [...] Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief.

Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (327-8)

I mentioned that I read Velutha as a partly individualized figure, and I think this is due to the several points of view employed. There is, first of all, the narrator's own voice drily describing Velutha's childhood and his return to Ayemenem after four years of absence. Or on the fateful day of Ammu's and Velutha's mutual recognition as man and woman, it is his physical appearance that invites the narrator's attention. (174) Further, he is seen through the eyes and the mind of other characters. His father, for example, recognizes an assuredness in Velutha which he himself does not possess and which worries him. Estha and Rahel who quickly befriend the young man are impressed by his craftsman's skilled hands. And there is, of course, Ammu who, as it were, takes over the narrator's angle by concentrating on Velutha's physique: his body, cheekbones and smile. Later again and dreaming about him, Ammu is mainly taken up by his physical appearance — which incidentally also takes centre stage in her mind as in the narrator's in their love-making. Velutha, it appears, is constructed as a type of the *noble untouchable*. Ammu in her dream even raises him to the level of 'The God of Loss', 'The God of Small Things': a symbolic heightening of this character which assumes central importance in the narrator's story.

Still, there is a third point of view: Velutha's own thoughts and feelings as presented directly to the reader, and it is here where he gains individuality: through *his* realization of a 'new world' of wonder and fear:

In that brief moment, Velutha looked up and saw things that he hadn't seen before. Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history's blinkers.

Simple things.

For instance, he saw that Rahel's mother was a woman.

That she had dimples when she smiled. [...] He saw too that he was not necessarily the only giver of gifts. That *she* had gifts to give him too.

This knowing slid into him cleanly, like the sharp edge of a knife.

Cold and hot at once. It only took a moment. (176-7)

Similarly, in their first night together it is Velutha himself who conveys the turmoil of his emotions, his joy, love, apprehension, self-accusation and hope. And again, shortly before his life is ended, his happiness and hope:

He was suddenly happy. *Things will get worse*, he thought to himself. *Then better*. He was walking swiftly now, towards the Heart of Darkness.
As lonely as a wolf.
The God of Loss.
The God of Small Things.
Naked but for his nail varnish. (290)

However, at this point I would like to put forward an essential observation on the novel as a whole. A very careful reading of these sentences — which should and could easily be complemented by many more examples — reveals a characteristic narrative strategy, a specific employment of point of view which, I believe, sets the tone and mood not only of passages quoted here but of the whole story of *The God of Small Things*: The *persona* of the narrator is never very far from the scene narrated. “The knowing slid into him cleanly, like the sharp edge of a knife”, or the final four lines of my last quotation, are *her* words, not Velutha’s. To add just one final example. When he swims towards Ammu who is sitting on the stone steps leading to the water,

[h]e watched her. He took his time.
Had he known that he was about to enter a tunnel whose only egress was his own annihilation, would he have turned away?
Perhaps.
Perhaps not.
Who can tell? (333)

The narrator’s presence makes itself felt here; she foregrounds herself not only here but throughout her narrative; which is to say, underneath the realistic story Roy has created a subtext, the mimetic mode is counterpoised by the fabulist; or to use the narrator’s own words:

Perhaps it’s true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours [...] must be resurrected from the ruins and *examined*. Preserved. Accounted for. Little events, ordinary things, smashed and *reconstituted*. *Imbued with new meaning*. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story. [my emphasis] (32–3)

“Imbued with new meaning” — the “little events”, the *small things*. In the manner Ammu and Velutha,

on the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively [...] stuck to the Small Things. [Because the] Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things. (338)

The fabulist mode then, by constantly transcending the mimetic, reveals the ‘Big Things’ through the ‘Small Things’, gives those who challenge the ‘love laws’ tragic stature in their failure. This is achieved through a number of rhetorical and structuring narrative devices of which only a few should be mentioned here. Obviously most noticeable is the narrator’s repetition of words and of often elliptic sentences as well as her use of innumerable similes and comparisons. Their frequent employment gradually endows them with symbolic power which in turn contributes towards an intricate pattern of the meaning of events and actions and of the personality of the actors. To quote, out of context and at random, some significant examples: The God of Small Things; Pappachi’s moth; Touchables; a chink in History; hole in the Universe; when the Love Laws were made; a cold moth lifted a cold leg; infinnate [sic!] joy; viable die-able age; later — Lay Ter; no Locusts Stand I; things can change in a day; the time was ten to two; mosquito on a leash; like old roses on a breeze; click and click; tomorrow; he left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors — and so on.

Structurally, *The God of Small Things* is the creation of a highly reflective and intellectual artistic mind that breaks up the linear time sequence of the story and mingles and combines present, past and future, memories, dreams and allusive foresight as effortlessly as it shifts from one point of view to another — and I have not referred to all of them. The pattern that emerges resembles a carpet with its basic structure woven in the first chapter and its details then added, returned to and reworked one by one. Here, a particular and unique design in its overall pattern should not be overlooked because it reveals itself as a combination of the two historical dimensions of the novel mentioned earlier, the socio-cultural and the political-aesthetic. I am referring to the chapters “God’s Own Country” and “Kochu Thomban”. Both present us with Ayemenem or Kerala in the 1990s as experienced by Rahel after her return, and precisely because of their differing time level, they raise the question of the political-aesthetic site of *The God of Small Things*.

“God’s Own Country”, the name given to a tourist resort near the river

with the old but now renovated 'History House' as its centre, ironically negates its very meaning because it is a purely man-made business venture set up at the expense of nature and people; of the river, its fishermen and the villagers of Ayemenem. The river greets Rahel "with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed." (124) The imagery of sickness and disease is further complemented by images of the filth and stench of the "shanty hutments" on the river bank, where people have been screened off from the resort. "God's Own Country" is fake history and fake culture. The ancestral Kerala homes with their furniture and knick-knacks bought from old families and the "trunkated kathakali performances" in the evenings are "toy histories for rich tourists to play in." (126) Similarly, Ayemenem has not only "swelled to the size of a little town" but also turned into a potentially violent community because of its "press of people". (128) Only Comrade K.N.M. Pillai has remained unchanged: smug, economically well-off and socially true to stereotype in appearance and his own peculiar brand of English. Indeed, true to his conviction: "Change is one thing. Acceptance is another." (279)

Juxtaposing "Kochu Thomban" with "God's Own Country" means moving from one make-believe world into another; yet from a tone of sarcasm and irony to one of praise, and from a mood of suppressed anger and sadness to one of rapture, peace and acceptance. The narrator's description of Rahel's visit to the temple to offer a coconut to the elephant turns into a rhetorically impressive praise song of oral quality about Kathakali Man and his performance, followed by a similarly dense description of his enactment of kathakali, or the retelling of the main story of the Mahabharata. It is an exceptional piece of writing, quite unique within the novel, in which the narrator appears to totally identify with her narrative and to merge with its content. She obviously underwrites Ayemenem men's need

to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives; [for] turning to tourism to stave off starvation. (229)

But does she also identify with the story the way the dancers do? With the story's meaning and the function it has for these men? That is, to identify with their religion, their culture and cultural history? And with Kunti who "invoked the Love Laws"? (233)

The narrator's emphatic soliloquy bears echoes for me of Raja Rao's old woman narrator in *Kanthapura*. Yet eventually she steps back after the dancing has come to an end and the make-belief world of the dancers is

laid to rest. Now we are made to look into the minds of Rahel and Estha (who had joined her in the temple):

There was madness there that morning. Under the rose bowl. It was no performance. Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage. Another kind of frenzy [...] The brutal extravagance of this matched by the savage economy of that. They sat there, Quietness and Emptiness [...] Trapped in the bog of a story that was and wasn't theirs. (235-6)

Here we are again, at the textual level, of being told of 'Small things' containing 'Big things'. Violence, destruction and death as the story of a culture, of its history, reaching back to the times when the 'love laws' were made.

I return to my questions raised at the beginning, of the meaning of history, tradition and modernity, of the individual and society. What do I call the political-aesthetic site of *The God of Small Things*? Does it appeal to tradition in the sense of upholding the 'love laws', of merging with the kathakali meaning, as the dancers do, or of feeling helplessly lost in the face of the dehumanizing effects and the ecological damage capitalism has brought to the countryside? Or does it appeal to modernity in the sense that the 'love laws' must be abolished since they destroy women and men who strive for their self-realization as individuals? There is no question that *The God of Small Things* rejects modernity in the cloak of "God's Own Country", as much as it does tradition as the rule of the 'love laws'. The answer then must obviously be searched elsewhere. In the fate of Estha and Rahel? Or in that of the kathakali dancer? In 'Quietness and Emptiness', or in the dancer who has turned into

Regional Flavour [... who] checks his rage and dances [...] collects his fees [...] stops by the Ayemenem temple, he and the others with him, and they dance to ask pardon of the gods. (231)

Or must the novel not be placed in today's post-colonial world? As a representation of the pull between tradition and modernity where neither the one nor the other offers ready-made formulas as to how to live in it? And where, perhaps, Chacko is the 'true' representative of its heterogeneity, its hybridity. He who in spite of the stereotypical role he is cast in, is never really able to strip himself off his colonized mind: the ex-Balliol student

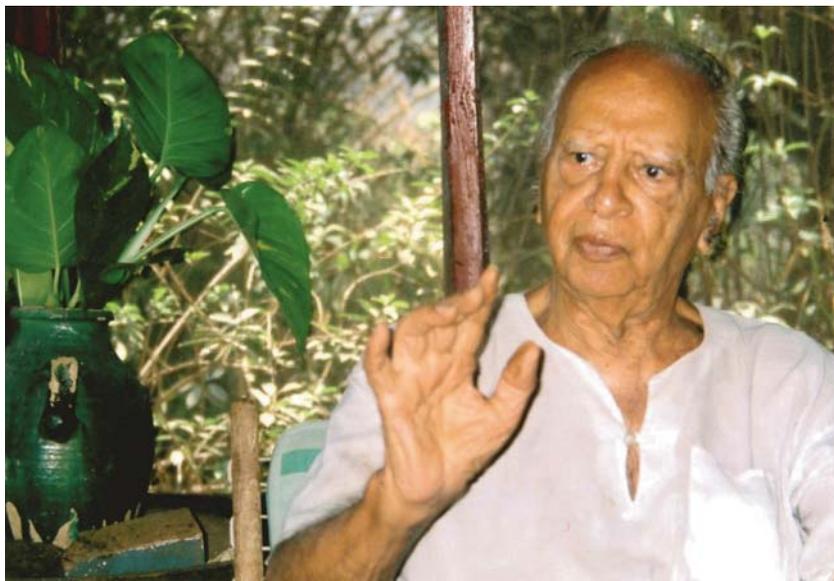
with his rowing oar from Oxford, his European suit and his knowledge of English, his idea of modernizing the pickle factory by buying the latest in machinery, and his final, though similarly unsuccessful migration to Canada as an antiques dealer.

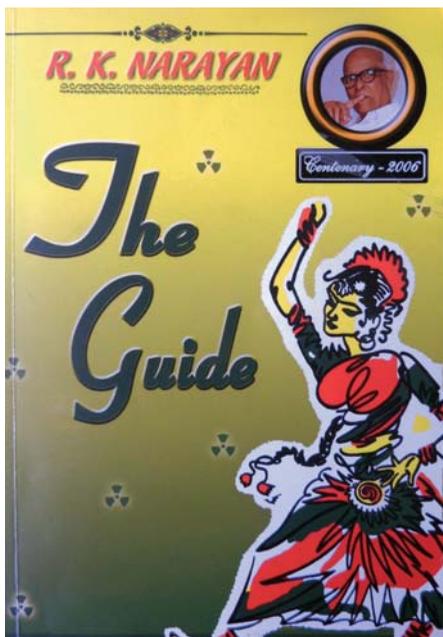
Happy, however, are the K.N.M. Pillais.
Perhaps.
But who wants to be a Pillai?

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GENTLE ROUND THE CURVES





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