

## Narrating Mythical Mediations in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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The *God of Small Things* is interspersed with references to Shakespeare, mentioned on several occasions: *The Tempest*, *Julius Cæsar*, *Macbeth*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and the theatrical metaphor unwinds itself throughout the whole narrative, investing some of the characters with a myth

ological dimension whereas others are debunked, such as Chacko with "his Reading Aloud voice" (142), for instance. Interestingly enough "the play within the play" is a dramatic device which can be found in ancient Sanskrit literatures, long before Shakespeare or Corneille, and later on in Kathakali theatre. So, when the Kochamma family greet Margaret and Sophie Mol at Cochin Airport: "The rehearsals had been rehearsed. It was the Day of the Play" (136), and the scene looks like a real dress-rehearsal. Moreover, the "Arrivals Lounge" is equipped with a curtain which paradoxically appears as a refuge for Rahel: "The dirty airport curtain was a great comfort and a darkness and a shield" (146). In this passage comedy is verging on tragedy. In return, the news of the death of Joe, Margaret's second husband, is "delivered by a young policeman [who] looked strangely comical, like a bad actor auditioning for a solemn part in a play" (250). And here, tragedy borders upon comedy. Likewise, the old photograph of Chacko and Margaret's wedding, which portends its forthcoming failure, evokes a grotesque "fancy-dress party," a masquerade (240). Or else, on their way to arrest Velutha, "The Kottayam police. A cartoonplatoon. New-Age princes in funny pointed helmets" (304), become a burlesque parade. Undoubtedly, the policemen are derided, but there is more to it than meets the eye: there is an allusion to Kathakali, its actor-dancers and their head-gears or *topi*.

However, the players are sometimes in tune, such as Mammachi manoeuvred by Baby Kochamma who pours insults over Velutha and spits at him after caring after him "since he was a child" (283-86). But

often, the characters are wretched performers; for instance Latha, Comrade Pillai's niece, reciting Walter Scott's poem *Lochinvar* in an incomprehensible diction, pausing "theatrically" and looking "around an imaginary audience" (271); or Lenin, his son, declaiming an extract from *Antony and Cleopatra* without understanding anything (274-75). Yet, these sketches and masquerades, either ludicrous or tragical, are only interludes, satelites revolving round the main drama embedded in the novel.

In fact, the main play begins in the Ayemenem House in which the scenery has been set up and some protagonists are already playing their parts on the stage, whereas others "are on the periphery of the play" (184), like Velutha who is melting in the natural landscape (174), Rahel who "slipped off the play," or Ammu "Off stage, [who] watched them perform their elaborate Official Greeting" (175), well-directed like a ballet with Mammachi playing Handel's *Water Music* (166-67) on her violin and then silenced and bullied into stopping by her son (183). The pantomime is underway, the real play being enacted backstage where Ammu is watching Rahel and Velutha, when "Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment" (176), a short sentence fraught with meaning which throws a bridge between the theatre and theatricals: from then on time and space seem both linear and circular, as though the author had wanted to create a mythical and timeless world. Thus the reader is gradually introduced into the sacred world of Kathakali, legends, tales and myths, the author enlarging the boundaries of genres.

Yet, Baby Kochamma, the darkest character and, to some extent, her double and servant Kochu Maria, both belong to the type of the *kari*. In fact, the twins' great-aunt's frustration, due to unrequited love and repressed sexuality, is unfathomable (22); she appears as a real demon both in her misdeeds and in her physical appearance: she has not a fake pointed and black breast as in Kathakali, but "Bosom swinging. Melons in a blouse" (95). Moreover, her make-up is quite theatrical, and the "pale grey" on her forehead (22) alludes to the *cutti*, the fringe of rice paste laid in relief on the Kathakali actor-dancers' cheeks just before their making-up. On the other hand, the Grimm brothers' tale *Hänsel and Gretel* is evoked at the end of the novel: Estha and Rahel are "Hansel and Gretel in a ghastly fairy tale in which their dreams would be captured and redreamed" (293), and Baby Kochamma resembles the malevolent and wicked witch in wait for children in the little gingerbread house in the forest. In the German *Märchen*, there are no good fairies but equivocal characters, not attractive at all but old, ugly and disquieting. They can be midwives, magicians or witches and they usually embody Fate, being the guardians of rites and traditions; such may appear

Baby Kochamma to the twins who used to spend happy reading nights with Amma. It is noteworthy that some tales are not innocent at all but cruel with mutilations, murders or sacrifices, or deal with fraternal love, and the limit between dream and reality is often blurred.

On that score, the author seems to play on contrasts, first in order to highly stylize her characters, and then to lay emphasis on two worlds which are apparently irreconcilable without undergoing a mystic experience, at least for some of them, such as the couple of bisexual twins. Estha and Rahel are strongly individualized and differentiated, and can be, like their mother, related to the category of the *vasam minukku* dominated by the *guna sattva*. With their costumes, make-up and stage properties, they look far less traditional, excepting Velutha, the God of Small Things.

As for Estha, the wardrobe master (189), he is easily identifiable with "his beige and pointy shoes and his Elvis puff" (37) and "his drainpipe trousers and pointy collared shirts" (226). As regards Rahel, her properties are the reflection of her personality: her hair "held together by a Love-in-Tokyo, her toy wristwatch and her yellow-rimmed red plastic sunglasses" (37). Like Rahel, Ammu is surrounded by circular items such as "a thin bangle with snakeheads that she put away for Rahel" (44); or her "tangerine-shaped transistor radio that she always took with her to the river" (217). However, her hair plays a part in the tale and may be reminiscent of the *tirassila* or drop-curtain: "[Velutha] drew her hair around them like a tent. Like her children did when they wanted to exclude the outside world" (336). She is also portrayed half-undressed as to extol her sensuality, her femininity and her maternity (222-23), and, as the tale unravels, she keeps transforming: she can be a witch (44, 332), an *apsara*, a celestial dancer or a water nymph; or even the twins' surrogate father (149). Finally, she is Velutha's initiator, "a luminous woman as wide and deep as a river in spate" (336-337). But as in the Grimm brothers' tales she is loving and caring, dies in an early age and the twins miss her a lot.

Furthermore, Velutha, The God of Small Things (265), whose name in Malayalam means "white" (73, 175 and 334), the colour associated both to mourning, light and the *guna sattva*, belongs to the type of the *pacca*, even though his head is not crowned with a *muti* or *kiritam*. His favourite colour is green, the prevailing colour for the *pacca*. Green is also the colour of water quite in keeping with his personage who shares privileged relations with nature and the waters of the Meenachal and the monsoons, since "on his back, his lucky leaf from the birthmark tree. . . made the monsoons come on time" (175) and finally, he is com-

pared to "a log. A serene crocodile" (333). He is also gifted and talented (74-75), somewhat a magician who disappeared for four years (77). For Ammu, his perfect features conjure up the figure of an idol, a true divine incarnation through her description of his sculptural body who "left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no images in mirrors" (265 and 289). He becomes a disembodied spirit, an *avatara* or divine descent which gives rise to Ammu's portentous day-dreaming of a one-armed man (215-17), foreboding the forthcoming death of the mutilated god whose statue will be soon stamped and crushed by evil forces in the History House on the other bank of the Meenachal river located in the Heart of Darkness. In all likelihood, Arundhati Roy creates a new type of *pacca*, closer to nature and contemporary issues, like environment or untouchability. She also infuses a variation into the setting which is traditionally reduced to a curtain, a stool and a lamp, occasionally instilling visual arts, such as sculpture or miniature painting, when love is pervading, so as to attain some harmony. Hence the operatic dimension of the novel and a quite baroque spectacle which blend together with favourable results in accordance with the fruitful fusion of the old and the new in which past and present are finally superimposed. In this respect, it emerges that the writer seems to refuse the natural, mundane world as opposed to the world of Arts and Literature.

However, the Ayemenem house is not only a stage, it is also the theatre of a tragedy, a menacing place full of dangers, closed and empty, as the History House, the twins' second house and refuge, used to be (2). Estha and Rahel meet again there and find themselves like "a pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative" (191), like Hänsel and Gretel in the witch's bread house, in which the sorcerer Baby Kochamma, the mistress of the house, has borrowed Kali's traits and destructive power, changing them into "frozen two-egg fossils" (105). Be it as it may, Arundhati Roy's fiction is seemingly turned into a closed space of echoes.

On the other hand, the History House is marked under the seal of petrification and has become a protective shelter for those who will soon be ghosts (53, 55), the reflection of the Ayemenem house, both of them being the antitheses of the house of The Sound of Music (105). It is also the symbol, first of colonialism, then of neo-colonialism (126). The trade and profanation of the cultural heritage (229) finally lead the humiliated actor-dancers to the Ayemenem temple "to ask pardon of their gods" (229) in the deafening dizziness and the intoxicating tempo rising to a crescendo of the *danasi* which winds up the drama, after the triumph of illegitimate violence and before the removal of their costumes

and make-up. The image of impurity, pollution, is already present elsewhere in the novel as shown by the effigy of the Kathakali dancer on the advertising billboard on the roof rack of the blue Plymouth (231). And, as far as dance is concerned, it appears as a creative activity since there is transgression of the human condition and finitude, the materiality of the dancer's body being no more a hindrance. In any case, the History House impersonates History as a destructive agent: at first with Sophie Mol's drowning (293), then with Velutha trampled to death (308), and as a consequence, Ammu's death. Hence, Estha is ceaselessly haunted by the direct part he played in the deaths of his beloved.

The Ayemenem house, with its pickle factory, is also doomed to bankruptcy under Chacko's disastrous management. Thus, the History House being converted into a hotel, and the Ayemenem house into a tumbledown state, the adult twins can only take refuge, at first in Ammu's room, now Estha's, "whose walls would soon learn their harrowing secrets" (224), which appears as a kind of motherly sanctuary and where they used to share their nightly reading (59). Later on, the bedside lamp becomes an oil lamp in Ammu's dreams (215, 218), when she is elated by the God of Small Things, when her room appears as a silent sanctuary and the lamp conjures up the lamp vilakku of the "colonnaded kuthambalam of the temple" which makes the place sacred, symbolizing the absolute and the divine light. To a lesser extent, Ammu's hair may represent the tirassila or drop-curtain, whereas the kuthambalam or theatrical temple is situated outside the temple and resembles a true sanctuary adorned with granite or wooden sculpted columns, sculptures and coffers.

Significantly enough, during the representation, Rahel, and then Estha, sitting straight on the floor against a pillar, are attending the following scene: "When the light from the brass lamp began to flicker and die, they called a truce. Bhima poured the oil, Dushasana cleaned the charred wick. Then they went back to war" (234-35). Therefore, to a certain extent, their mother's room is the miniature replica of the Ayemenem temple, after being the scene of shared intimacy and of the final reuniting of the twins who, responding to the appeal of the sound of the chenda drum (228), are inevitably carried away to the temple, with "the promise of a story" (192), with its "mystery and [its] magic" (229).

In the same way, the death of the sacred elephant of Ettumanoor heralds both Velutha's death and Rahel's offering to Kochu Thomban now called Vellya Thomban, the sacred elephant of the Ayemenem temple, the elephant being endowed with a divine status in Hindu religion. Moreover, the importance of the river of life is evident in the deification of the Ganga or the Yamuna for instance, but in The God of

Small Things it has also disappeared and is "no more than a swollen drain now" (124); the border parting the worlds of the dead and of the living is blurred as is the space of transgression. So, the temple becomes the privileged and mediatory place between the twins' tragical story and the timeless tales whose theatrical representation portends a strong moment of communion and bluntly gives birth to the twins' awareness: "There was madness there this morning. It was no performance. Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage" (235). Rahel, then Estha, are both confronted with the ghosts of the past, Ammu, Velutha and Sophie Mol, and relive stories in which their memories exert a nearly divine faculty within the framework of the performance. Thus, one after the other, the beloved reappear; Karna-Kunti and Surya's son-is both Estha and Velutha; Karna-Velutha "whom the world has abandoned. Karna alone. . . A prince raised in poverty [by a charioteer or a paravan]. Born to die unfairly" (231-32), or else, Karna-Estha, Estha Alone in the Abhilash Talkies (94, 101), in the Hotel Sea Queen (119), in the Madras Mail (323), Estha-the-Compassionate (292) who unwillingly accepts Sophie Mol in their clandestine expedition to the river and unintentionally betrays Velutha to save Ammu. Even more, like Duryodhana and Dushasana, Velutha and Sophie Mol died on the same day: "He and She. We and Us" (237), and just as in Kathakali, their deaths are depicted with the utmost violence, the policemen's boots and lathi being as bloody as Bhima's club. On the other hand, Kunti compelled to abandon her son reflects Ammu's attitude leaving Estha alone with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, or worse, returning him to his father (324), obeying Chacko's orders, himself prompted to do so by Baby Kochamma, the witch and deity of destruction. On that account, the author superimposes various periods of the protagonists' lives, abolishing the boundaries between fiction and reality as well, the final stasis gradually gaining ground as the twins are regaining their joint identity and as the decor is shrinking back into their mother's sanctuary-room.

In fact, these passages from Hänsel and Gretel are not only reminiscent of some of Arundhati Roy's novel but also of Thomas Mann's *Wälsungenblut* and, of course of Wagner's *Die Walküre* discovered by the German writer in 1892 in Lübeck. In this respect, Estha and Rahel are much closer to Siegmund and Sieglinde because of their incestuous relations germinating and rooting from their earliest childhood, before their separation, when they "slept with their arms around each other" (122), and taking place after being reunited as adults: "they held each other close, long after it was over" (328), as in Thomas Mann's short

story. Furthermore, both twin couples break the taboo of exogamy after attending two operatic performances, respectively Kathakali and Die Walküre, both of them closely linked to the Sacred, to the divine origins of Man, as if the couples' rooms were actual sanctuaries.

In return, Estha and Rahel's fraternal love does not seem tinged with passion; it rather evokes their nostalgia for the golden age: "They had known each other before Life began" (327); it evokes their pre-lapsarian dream as well: "If they slept there, she and Estha, curled together like foetuses in a shallow steel womb" (188), Ammu's bedroom symbolizing the motherly womb. But "the little family curled up and asleep on a blue cross-stitch counterpane" (321) is no more after the tragedy, after Ammu's infringement of the laws. And significantly the myth of the heavenly twins is re-enacted as though the author wanted to exhaust its meanings.

Estha, the wardrobe-master, "the draping expert," excels in the art of disguise: they "looked like three raccoons to pass off as Hindu ladies" (189); he has got "a nun's voice, as clear as clean water" (101), "a clear soprano" (197), and he does not jib at doing the housework at his father's: "He did the sweeping, swabbing and all the laundry. He learned to cook and shop for vegetables" (11), refusing masculine privileges, though he is not the only effeminate man in the novel. Pappachi "had a little fleshy knob in the centre of his upper lip that dropped down over his lower lip as a sort of effeminate pout" (51), and even the twins' father's letter "was written in a slanting, effeminate convent school hand" (9); as concerns Velutha, he "had let them paint his nails with red Cutex that Ammu had discarded. . . A carpenter with gaudy nails" (190), maybe a modern variant of Kathakali, reminiscent of the tips of the hands usually painted red with *alta*, a red washable fluid, or henna, which serves the purpose of hightening the mudras. So, through this device, which displays a deep sense of stagecraft and likens Estha to the character of Kunti-Ammu- "She too was a man grown soft and womanly, a man with breasts, from doing female parts for years. Her movements were fluid. Full of woman" (232)-the author draws a telling parallel between her character and the Kathakali actor-dancer. However, in the performance, the feminization of the actor rather conveys his total dedication to his art, evolving on the margins between fiction and reality: "The kathakali Man is the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul. His only instrument. . . . He has a magic in him, this man within the painted mask and swirling skirts" (230). Actually, the dancer's personality, aesthetic and spiritual involment cannot be set aside: by his body he indicates the general importance of a song, with his hands he conveys its meaning, with his eyes he expresses the feelings and sentiments, and with his stamping feet, he keeps the time.

By and large, this reveals a new possibility of breaking in the realm of artistic creativity and freeing people from neocolonial domination. In fact, in *The God of Small Things*, the whole process of identification and reconstruction might be the emergence of a more permeable post-frontier era, including a process of indianization as well. In other words, Arundhati Roy seems to draw from every source in accordance with the free exchange of cultures and knowledge, in all likelihood engaging herself in the pursuit of some more positive and constructive globalization, as it were.

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