

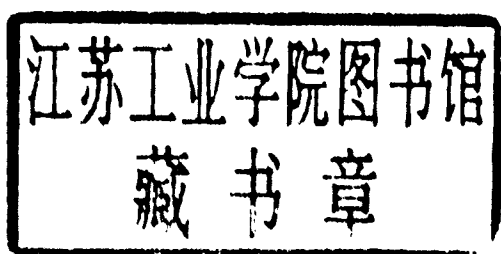
Arundhati Roy's
**The God of
Small Things**

Alex Tickell

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Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Alex Tickell



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References to any secondary material can be found in the footnotes. The first reference will contain full bibliographic details, and each subsequent reference to the same text will contain the author's surname, title and page number.

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Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* generated controversy and encountered mixed critical opinion almost from the moment of its publication in 1997. It was not only professional reviewers and literary critics (not to mention publishers, lawyers and politicians) who differed in their judgement about the novel; Roy's wider readership also expressed strikingly varied opinions about its merits and, as this is a *reader's* guide to *The God of Small Things*, it is perhaps fitting to start our exploration of the novel by looking at some of these responses.

Reviews of any successful novel by its readers tend to divide naturally into distinctly positive or negative reactions – those who find a book mildly enjoyable or vaguely irritating are less likely to make the effort to record their feelings. But reading the 124 customer reviews of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* posted on the web site of a major online bookstore, we find opinions so opposed that it is sometimes difficult to believe that they refer to the same work. (Teaching *The God of Small Things* on university literature courses, this polarized response is also something I encounter in seminar discussions of the novel.) In their online reviews, a number of Roy's more admiring readers describe an almost mystical attachment to her fiction and regard the novel as 'magical', 'breathtakingly beautiful' and 'close to perfection'. Many also note the book's emotional impact and its lingering 'imprint' on the reader, and others talk perceptively about the fantastic, interlocking musical patterns of Roy's writing, its descriptive originality and the way key words and phrases evoke specific moods and events. In the opposite camp, Roy's less appreciative readers repeatedly attack the novel's unwarranted 'hype', its 'tediously' overwritten or needlessly embellished style and the difficulty of following the plot through its fragmented time scheme. Some readers even reflect on the passionate, contrasting reactions that Roy's novel often generates amongst friends to whom they have recommended the book, and one suggests, succinctly, that, without being able to anticipate which, readers of *The God of Small Things* will always be either 'lovers' or 'strugglers'.

This guide is designed for both groups, and has been written for students who have encountered *The God of Small Things* on college and university courses and readers who are simply interested in knowing more about this remarkable novel, its contexts and its critics. If you have enjoyed, or even fallen in love with, *The God of Small Things* then this guide will help you think about *how* Roy achieves her structural and stylistic effects and will introduce you to a range of the most

significant literary criticism published on the novel, as well as outlining key approaches and significant biographical and historical details. If you have struggled with *The God of Small Things*, then this guide may not change your opinion of the work, but it will allow you to situate Roy's fiction in its cultural and political surroundings – from the structure of the Hindu caste system to the contemporary rise of Indian environmentalist activism – and will provide answers to questions about *why* Roy writes in the way she does. As the epigraph of *The God of Small Things* from the author, art critic and painter John Berger indicates, this is a novel that resists a 'single story' or a single exclusive perspective, and in writing this guide I have tried to preserve a sense of the different readings and sometimes conflicting critical views on *The God of Small Things*, in order to allow you, as much as possible, to come to your own conclusions about Roy's fiction. (Throughout this guide I refer extensively to Roy's essays and comments on her work, but we must remember that authorial perspectives are sometimes contradictory and changeable and do not exclude other interpretations or 'stand in' for the novel itself.)

Two further points need to be made here, both of which relate to Roy's own views. In recent interviews, Roy has drawn attention to the connection between knowledge and power and has criticized the role of education, especially 'specialists' in higher education, for using their knowledge to preserve, and justify, the actions of governments and financial institutions. For Roy, academic specialists of all kinds must be treated with suspicion because of their stake in protecting their own (overvalued) expertise, and their responsibility for 'trying to prevent people from understanding what is really being done to them'.¹ These are provocative claims, especially for teachers and students who encounter *The God of Small Things* (and read this guide) on special university courses devoted to women's writing, South-Asian fiction or postcolonial literature. However, the way specialist knowledge is used to support political systems (for instance, the strategic use of a knowledge of 'oriental' cultures in European colonialism) is a subject that also concerns academic critics working on literature from colonial and formerly colonized countries, and these debates will be explored as a matter of course in this guide. Moreover, Roy is not opposed to 'specialist knowledge' as such, as long as it is available to be shared and communicated and valued realistically – and one of the central aims of this guide is to make the academic discussions of *The God of Small Things* more accessible and understandable for the general reader.

Roy's self-proclaimed aim, as both author and political activist, is 'to never complicate what is simple, to never simplify what is complicated [and . . .] to be able to communicate to ordinary people what is happening in the world'.² If specialists maintain power by overcomplicating the simple then *The God of Small Things* reveals, in its presentation of the traditional dance-drama of Kerala, *kathakali*, the dangers of simplifying the complicated. Stripped of its meaning and compressed into short pool-side performances for the benefit of Western tourists, the *kathakali* shows us what happens when cultural forms (such as oral narratives or even novels) are abbreviated and simplified. Guidebooks such as this one,

1 Arundhati Roy, *The Chequebook and the Cruise Missile*, London: HarperCollins, 2004, p. 120.

2 Arundhati Roy, *The Chequebook and the Cruise Missile*, p. 120.

especially when they introduce Western readers to literary works from non-Western cultures, risk the same kind of oversimplification, and for that reason I have provided a larger, more detailed cultural contexts section than is usual in the Routledge Guides to Twentieth-Century Literature series. However comprehensive a reader's guide is, its capacity to convey the complexity of a literary work is always limited – and in motifs such as the *kathakali* Roy hints that there are certain kinds of knowledge that are not easily summarized or condensed and implies that the task of understanding, especially across cultures, may involve both intuition and personal commitment. This guidebook will provide you with essential critical and contextual tools for reading *The God of Small Things*, but at the same time its aim is to encourage further reading and informed reflection and to provide a starting point, or a series of potential starting points, for your own ideas about this fascinating novel.

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Text and contexts

The text

Memory and identity

Set in the southern Indian state of Kerala and divided, chronologically, between the late 1960s and the early 1990s, the plot of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* pivots around a fated, forbidden relationship between a Syrian-Christian divorcee, Ammu, and a low-caste 'untouchable' carpenter, Velutha. Much of the narrative of *The God of Small Things* (cited hereafter as *TGST*) is presented from the perspective of Roy's twinned child-protagonists, Ammu's children Estha and Rahel, and the decisive events of the novel – the cross-caste affair, the subsequent beating and murder of Velutha by the police, and the death by drowning of the children's cousin, Sophie Mol – are revealed gradually as the adult twins meet more than twenty years later. Roy's complex doubled time scheme allows for a meditative, almost obsessive remembrance of these family tragedies, and it is through the close juxtaposition of past and present that Roy is able to develop the novel's other central concern, the delayed effect of these damaging events on Estha and Rahel, their traumatized return to the family home in the town of Ayemenem and their (incestuous) reconciliation in adulthood.

Like Ammu's deferred choice of a proper surname for her children, Roy's novel resists categorization and draws together elements of the fairy tale, psychological drama, pastoral lyric, tragedy and political fable. Roy's interest in the continuities between childhood and adulthood does, however, point to an important generic template in the *Bildungsroman* – a type of novel, usually narrated in the first person, in which the central character's growth from childhood to maturity and their developing self-awareness provide the main framework of the narrative. The enduring resonance of the past in Estha and Rahel's adult lives and their troubled return to Ayemenem suspends and almost reverses the genre's conventional progressive pattern, leading some reviewers to describe Roy's third-person narrative as an 'anti-*Bildungsroman*' in which the main protagonists 'never properly grow up'.¹

1 Alice Traux, 'A Silver Thimble in her Fist', *New York Times*, 25 May 1997. See also Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics and Postcolonial Literature*, Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 207.

In fact, the twins' 'arrested development' means that their story stretches both backwards and forwards: not only into the remembered/repressed past in a pattern of 'analepsis' (retrospection or flashback) but also towards its horrifying conclusion, which is anticipated, repeatedly, in a process of 'prolepsis' (a 'flash-forward' in which future events are anticipated in the narrative 'present'). Roy succinctly describes the effect of these narrative devices when she states, 'the structure of the book ambushes the story – by that I mean the novel ends more or less in the middle of the story and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word tomorrow'.² As in the standard *Bildungsroman*, memory is central to both character development and plot in *TGST*, but the process of reminiscence is rarely ordered like a conventional narrative, tending instead to be repetitious, digressive and continually triggered by 'little events, ordinary things'.³ Indeed, this sifting,⁴ beachcombing return over the ground of memory shapes the structure of *TGST* as a whole, and the process through which 'remembered' small things become 'the bleached bones of a story',⁵ is one of the triumphs of the novel.

Because of its close formal connection to biography and memoir, the *Bildungsroman* has often been used by postcolonial writers as a means of connecting the political with the individual and allegorizing the struggle for independence and the growth of the newly independent nation in the personal progress of a central protagonist.⁶ In the 1920s and 1930s the highly popular memoirs of India's nationalist leaders, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, fulfilled a similar function and seemed, in Nehru's words, to show how during the struggle against the British 'our prosaic existence [. . .] developed something of epic greatness in it'.⁷ For many postcolonial writers and artists, however, the 'epic' experience of national independence was followed by a growing disillusionment with the tarnished ideals and unfulfilled promises of the independent nation-state. Thus, in contemporary Indian literature we are more likely to encounter ironic or satirical reworkings of the established convention of the national allegory. This is certainly the case in *TGST* where the tension between 'big and small things', and the obvious failure of political groups such as the communists to represent their constituents, serves to undermine the positive association of self and nation so evident in earlier nationalist fictions.

Postcolonial authors have also used the *Bildungsroman* to explore the problems of retaining roots and preserving a sense of cultural belonging in the aftermath of colonial rule. In *TGST*, these issues are registered in the uncanny linked consciousness of the twins, Estha and Rahel, who are 'physically separate, but

2 Roy, quoted in Julie Mullaney, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Reader's Guide*, London and New York: Continuum, 2002, p. 56.

3 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Ch. 1, p. 32.

4 In *TGST*, memory is compared to an eccentric woman whom Rahel encounters in a train carriage: 'Memory was like that woman on the train. Insane in the way she sifted through dark things in a closet and emerged with the most unlikely ones – a fleeting look, a feeling' (Ch. 2, p. 72).

5 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, London: HarperCollins Flamingo, 1998, Ch. 1, pp. 32–3. All subsequent references will be given in the body of the text.

6 See Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15, 1986, pp. 65–88, and Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London: Verso, 1992.

7 Jawaharlal Nehru quoted in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed.), *A History of Indian Literature in English*, London: Hurst, 2003, p. 153.

with joint identities' (Ch. 1, p. 2) and who seem to embody, in their compound subjectivity, the dislocated or split cultural identity of the colonized.⁸ In addition, the desire to recapture childhood or to reconcile oneself with a lost homeland has been a rich theme for 'diasporic' South-Asian writers, who have been forced to negotiate their sense of identity and 'translate' themselves after experiencing personal or familial migration. This is something that we will return to in comparisons between *TGST* and Salman Rushdie's writing (see Text and contexts, pp. 46–8), and while Roy is not part of India's literary diaspora herself, *TGST* relates numerous journeys and points towards the dislocating effects of migrancy and dispossession in the multiple returns of the story: Ammu's shameful return after her divorce, Rahel's return from America, Estha's 're-return' and the unhappy homecomings of South Indian migrant workers from the gulf states. Haunted, as adults, by a past that *cannot* be physically returned to, or changed, Estha and Rahel also experience the quintessentially 'migrant' predicament of an enduring sense of exile and loss, even as they are reunited in the familiar surroundings of their family home.

In common with other postcolonial novelists, Roy's sense of her own identity demands an awareness of the continuing, damaging effects of colonial rule. As she explains: 'Fifty years after independence, India is still struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultural insult [and . . .] we're still caught up in the business of "disproving" the white world's definition of us.'⁹ This issue is most evident in her sensitivity to language use and the force of 'History' in *TGST*, and we will see in the following pages that Roy recycles and challenges the linguistic inheritance of British colonialism in various ways. The dense patterns of quotation and literary reference that she weaves through *TGST* not only reveal the intermixtures and cross-fertilizations of contemporary South-Asian culture but also throw hidden or disturbing aspects of this history into relief. In keeping with her two-way time scheme, Roy does not confine herself to redressing the 'insults' of a colonial past, but is also keenly aware of the shadow of an older pre-colonial history. In this sense, 'the postcolonial' (as a belated 'disproving' critical response to colonialism) is just one aspect of *TGST*, and the novel also considers the enduring effects of India's ancient Vedic and Hindu history and traditions, as well as looking forward to its fully industrialized, globally integrated present.¹⁰

Melodrama and romance

In some of its European language translations, *TGST* has appeared with a subtitle defining it as 'a romance', and while this is clearly a marketing decision by Roy's publishers it also highlights another generic feature of her fiction. Much older than the novel, the romance, and popular subgenre variants such as the fairy tale, tend to be non-realist and deal in archetypes or emblematic figures, and, as a story of thwarted love, *TGST* inherits Indian folk-tale and romance traditions from

8 See Alex Tickell, 'The God of Small Things: Arundhati Roy's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 38(1), 2003, pp. 73–89, at p. 79.

9 Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2001, p. 13.

10 Roy, *Power Politics*, p. 12.

devotional *bhakti* literature as well as repeating some conventions of the European 'tragic' romance.¹¹ The recent success of another (historical, non-fiction) Indian romance, William Dalrymple's *White Mughals* (2002), which deals with a 'forbidden' love affair between a colonial official and an Indian princess, suggests that *TGST*'s popularity may owe something to enduring Western fantasies of India as a setting for interracial or – in this case – intercaste romance. As Saadia Toor points out, transgressive sexuality haunts the novel in the same way as it overshadows some famous English fictions about colonial India such as E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924).¹² Forbidden love that breaks religious or social boundaries (albeit between partners who often, ultimately, gain social acceptance) is also a staple of the Indian film industry and, whilst Roy herself is scathing about mainstream cinema in India, *TGST* can be read as a clever reworking and reinterpretation of this established popular-cultural theme.

Roy's debt to popular romance is also evident in the more melodramatic aspects of her novel. Indeed, Roy's moral vision is so uncompromising that complex characters are often presented in terms of their own overshadowing fates, or 'emblematic' character traits such as greed or jealousy, something that also echoes the dramatic conventions of *kathakali* (discussed in more detail on pp. 40–2). These techniques result in a novel that sets up melodramatic situations and relationships but then structures and nuances them in increasingly subtle ways.¹³ In a process of internal mirroring, *TGST* includes a number of unhappy sub-romances that counterpoint Ammu and Velutha's affair. The twins' great-aunt, Baby Kochamma, is disappointed in her unrequited love for an Irish priest, which is sublimated in the 'fierce, bitter garden' she raises, and their uncle Chacko's undergraduate marriage to an Englishwoman ends in divorce. Ammu herself is haunted by an exploitative marriage to the alcoholic manager of an Assam tea estate, and Rahel too inherits this pattern of doomed cross-cultural love in her marriage to an American architect. Significantly, all these 'romances' cross the boundaries of the Syrian-Christian community and threaten its 'caste' identity, but none is proscribed as severely as Ammu's 'unthinkable' affair with Velutha.

Romance and sexuality are both overshadowed by death in *TGST*, either figuratively, as a marital death-in-life (which Mammachi and Ammu, for a time, share), or as the brutal, often symbolic consequence of actual liaisons. In the latter category, Ammu, Velutha and Sophie Mol's deaths all occur as a darkly ironic, interminable working-out of the biblical warning about the wages of sin.¹⁴ The use of heightened melodramatic effect and the thematic proximity of love/desire and death also point towards Gothic romance influences in *TGST*, and these mesh with the novel's colonial antecedents in images of ghosts (most clearly in Kari Saipu as a spectral figure of paedophilic desire), the haunting persistence of the past and the uncanny doublings and premonitions generated by Roy's narrative technique. In the conclusion of *TGST*, the moment of incestuous love

11 See Gillian Beer, *The Romance*, London: Methuen, 1970.

12 Saadia Toor, 'Indo-Chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalisation India', *SOAS Literary Review* 2, 2000. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.soas.ac.uk/soaslit/2000_index.htm>.

13 Michiko Kakutani, 'Melodrama as Structure for Subtlety', *The New York Times*, 3 June 1997.

14 Romans 6:23.

between the 'returned' twins re-establishes the romance theme on the level of mythical archetype, providing an unsettling but also potentially redemptive counterpart to the sexual taboo-breaking of inter-caste love at the heart of the narrative.

Language and play

Roy's use of language, with its ability to disconcert, convey subtle tonal change and challenge received ideas, is an unmistakable characteristic of her fiction. In a much-quoted phrase, Roy has described language as 'the skin of my thought',¹⁵ and a sensual pleasure in wordplay, puns and rhymes infuses the novel. *TGST* works as an interesting postcolonial example of narrative as a 'word hoard', into which incidental phrases, songs, proverbs, road signs, quotes from Shakespeare, Kipling, *The Sound of Music* and fragments of Hindu epic are all intertextually gathered. Like its more fabular or fairy-tale aspects, a pleasure in collection, arrangement and hoarding mirrors the preoccupations of Roy's child-protagonists in the very form and patterning of *TGST*. Furthermore, with its non-standard spellings, reversed words, neologisms, repetitions and emphatic capitalizations, Roy's novel often tests the limits of prose; it frequently resembles blank verse, lingering, like an imagist poem or *haiku*, over an isolated detail or emotional state. In some instances the use of playful child-centred language to represent the cruelty of the adult world gives Roy's writing a tangible capacity to shock (as in Estha's encounter with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man),¹⁶ but Roy herself has also suggested, conversely, that some of her linguistic effects, such as repetition, work as a form of insulation against the horrifying events in the narrative. As she states: 'Repetition [was] used because it made me feel safe. Repeated words and phrases have a rocking feeling, like a lullaby. They help take away the shock of the plot.'¹⁷ As we shall see in the course of this guide, several critics have discussed Roy's linguistic effects, but her ability to capture the idiosyncrasies of children's language acquisition, which also forms an extended, subversive 'play' with language, is an aspect of the novel that deserves further study.

Because of its stylistic virtuosity, *TGST* has been criticized as sentimental, flawed by a 'facetious whimsicality' and 'inescapably and fatally compromised by the self-indulgence of its style'.¹⁸ Whether or not Roy's arch asides, repetitive phrasing and sometimes clumsy symbolism are major defects, or simply the inevitable weaknesses of a first novel,¹⁹ is a matter of opinion, but we should keep in mind that, as an Indian-English author, her experiments with language indicate some very specific cultural and political concerns. Indian novelists writing in English have frequently drawn attention to the problems involved in making an 'alien', colonially-imposed language the medium of Indian literary

15 Taisha Abraham, 'An Interview with Arundhati Roy', *ARIEL*, 29(1), 1998 p. 91.

16 See Elleke Boehmer, 'East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy', *Women*, 11 (1 and 2), 2000, pp. 61–70, at p. 70.

17 See Arundhati Roy, 'Winds, Rivers and Rain', *The Salon Interview*. Online. Accessible HTTP: <<http://www.salon.com/sept97/00roy.htm>> (accessed 28 November 2005).

18 Tom Deveson, 'Much Ado about Small Things', *Sunday Times*, 15 June 1997.

19 Shirley Chew, 'The House in Kerala', *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 May 1997.