

Secrecy, Community and Counter-History in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)

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Abstract. This article explores the different types of communities and the role of secrecy and counter-history in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), a novel in which secrecy plays a crucial role and in which the most genuine human relations are characterized by a desire to participate in otherness. This article examines Roy's subversion of the operative community by considering: (a) the different communitarian organizations in *The God of Small Things*, from the most organic (the caste system, patriarchy, religious institutions, communism and the commodification of culture) to the least organic (the community of Others and the community of lovers); (b) the connection between alterity, finitude and secrecy as preventing the unworked community from organicist fusion; (c) the link between alterity, finitude, secrecy and counter-history. Although ingrained within a deeply organicist community, the main characters in Roy's novel prove to have a vigorous capacity to trespass communitarian boundaries and to expose themselves to otherness.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Community, Secrecy, Counter-history.

[es] Secreto, Comunidad y Contra-Historia en *The God of Small Things* (1997) de Arundhati Roy

Resumen. Este artículo explora los diferentes tipos de comunidad y el papel que el secreto y la Contra-Historia juegan en la novela de Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997), una novela en la que el secreto juega un papel crucial y en la que las relaciones humanas más genuinas se caracterizan por el deseo de participar en la otredad. Este artículo examina la subversión de la comunidad operativa analizando: (a) las diferentes organizaciones comunitarias en *The God of Small Things*, desde las más orgánicas (el sistema de castas, el patriarcado, las instituciones religiosas, el comunismo y la comodificación de la cultura) a las menos orgánicas (la comunidad de Otros y la comunidad de amantes); (b) la relación entre alteridad, finitud y secreto para impedir la fusión orgánica de la comunidad desobrada; (c) la relación entre alteridad, finitud, secreto y Contra-Historia. Aunque enraizados en una comunidad profundamente orgánica, los protagonistas de esta novela demuestran una capacidad extraordinaria para transgredir los límites comunitarios y exponerse, así, a la otredad.

Palabras Clave: Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Comunidad, Secreto, Contra-Historia.

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How to cite this article: Valero Redondo, M. (2020) Secrecy, Community and Counter-History in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), in *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 28, 75-82.

1. Community: Theoretical Premises

The different communitarian conceptions in *The God of Small Things* deserve special attention. Inside the restrictive and organicist societies that coexist in Kerala, some genuine human relations take place, opening up the potential for alterity and difference. The term "community" has produced an inexhaustible debate and I think it necessary to introduce here the fundamental theoretical premises. In *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz* (2011), J. Hillis Miller offers an elucidation of Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of *unworked community* and Maurice Blanchot's related concept of *unavowable community*, which, in his own words, constitute "an alternative model of community" (Miller 2011: 13). These alternative models "unwork" the commonsensical model of society, the one "most people have in mind, explicitly or implicitly, when they speak of community" (Miller 2011: 13). This community that most of us take for granted is created by a group living and working together through time and it is

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the result of their collective and cooperative work and the product of a social contract they have, explicitly or implicitly, signed (Miller 2011: 13).

The commonly accepted model of community, which I will call “organic” or “operative,” presupposes pre-existing, self-enclosed subjectivities who have joined other subjectivities for the common good. In Nancy’s own words:

Community is not only intimate communication between its members, but also its organic communion with its own essence. It is constituted not only by a fair distribution of tasks and goods, or by a happy equilibrium of forces and authorities: it is made up principally of the sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community. In the motto of the Republic, *fraternity* designates community: the model of the family and of love (Nancy 2008: 9).

Therefore, these subjectivities create a social contract based on myths and determined and supervised by what Althusser calls “Ideological State Apparatuses,” that is, “a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (1971: 143).

In his alternative model, Nancy sees persons not as subjectivities but as “singularities” which possess a secret otherness that cannot be communicated to any other. In addition, each singularity is fundamentally characterized by its finitude or mortality. Community is then defined by the proximity of death: “Each singularity is exposed, at its limit, to a limitless or abyssal outside that it shares with the other singularities, from the beginning, by way of their common mortality” (2011: 16). Thus, as we cannot experience death in our own deaths, since death cannot be “experienced,” we experience it in the death of another, the death of a relative, a friend or a neighbor (2011: 16). This model unworks the previous, organic one; it is a negation in itself, “the community of those who have no community” (Blanchot 1988: 24) or, in Derrida’s words, “a community without community” (Caputo 1997: 106).

Hence, instead of individuals with self-enclosed subjectivities, Nancy puts singularities that are originally *partagés*, shared, open to an abyssal outside. However, he clarifies that, in order to overcome total immanence, the inoperative community needs a relation between its members beyond “individualism,” what Nancy calls *clinamen*, a concept that he takes from Lucretius and which means “an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other” (2008a: 3-4). The aim of this community is not a spiritual fusion or a transcendental communion but rather “being-together,” “being-in-common.” Thus, the present article explores Roy’s dismantling of the operative community by considering: (a) different communitarian conceptions in *The God of Small Things*, from the most organic (patriarchy, the caste system, communism...) to the least organic (the community of Others and the community of lovers); (b) the link between alterity, finitude and secrecy as preventing the unworked community from organicist fusion; (c) the connection between alterity, finitude and secrecy and counter-history. In Roy’s novel, the most genuine human relations are marked by a desire to participate in otherness through exposure of inner selfhood to the outside.

2. Kerala: An Operative Community

The Keralan society of *The God of Small Things* has a deep-rooted need for social bonds and an absorbing need for normative and moral guidance (Etzioni 1996: 167). This strong need for attachment and normative guidance is represented in the novel by the “Love Laws” which lay down “who should be loved, and how. And how much” (Roy 1998: 33). These “Love Laws” are the rules structuring the caste system, the patriarchal society of India, religious institutions, social exclusion and communism. Caste discrimination and class distinction prevail in *The God of Small Things*. Mammachi remembers with nostalgia a pre-independence time “when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint” (Roy 1998: 52). This caste discrimination still persists in the post-independence period. Thus, “Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched” (Roy 1998: 74), and Mammachi thinks “with an impenetrable touchable logic,” that Velutha is a gifted person who could have become “an engineer” if he were not a Paravan (Roy 1998: 75). Velutha is an outcast within the community; an outcast bearing the stigma of untouchability.

The members of upper-caste society are also victims of other hierarchies such as gender and class. The Keralan community is a patriarchal society where wives and daughters have no social status. Thus, whereas Chacko received a college education, “Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them” (Roy 1998: 38). Besides, as a divorced woman, Ammu is socially invisible:

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter—according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage—Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (Roy 1998: 45)

Domestic violence was also present in the Keralan community and in the microcosm of the Ipe family. Thus, Mammachi is the victim of a tyrannical husband: “Every night [Pappachi] beat [Mammachi] with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren’t new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place. One night Pappachi broke the bow of Mammachi’s violin and threw it in the river” (Roy 1998: 47). Mammachi herself holds patriarchal views in the way she educates her children. Whereas Chacko can have extramarital relationships with lower caste women working in the family factory, Ammu is severely punished for her love affair with dark-skinned and untouchable Velutha.

The “Love Laws” are also made by religious restrictions. Thus, Baby Kochamma “defied her father’s wishes and became a Roman Catholic” (Roy 1998: 21). She entered a convent as a trainee novice in order to win Father Mulligan over. Although she finally left the convent, she remained a Roman Catholic, developing a bad reputation in the Syrian-Christian community:

Reverend Ipe realized that his daughter had by now developed a “reputation” and was unlikely to find a husband. He decided that since she couldn’t have a husband there was no harm in her having an education. So he made arrangements for her to attend a course of study at the University of Rochester in America. (Roy 1998: 26)

Tellingly, Baby Kochama perpetuates this religious discrimination in her strong aversion to the twins, whom she considers “Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry” (Roy 1998: 45).

The communist movement of Kerala and its deceptive confrontation of the caste system is also strongly criticized in the novel since it perpetuates anti-democratic values in the country. Both Comrade Pillai and Chacko are political radicals but social conformists. They profess a Marxist ideology while upholding retrograde Indian traditions at the same time. Their traditional views always sustain their political practices. They refuse to dismantle the caste system which has been responsible for the evident economic and social inequalities which they want to confront. Thus, when Velutha turns to Comrade Pillai for assistance, Pillai’s response is that “you should know that the Party was not constituted to support workers’ *indiscipline* in their private life” (Roy 1998: 287). The communist Party reinforces the caste system by implying that, although he is a card-holder, Velutha is also a Paravan and therefore should be punished. Both Chacko and Comrade Pillai adopt a communist ideology “which centres on workers’ rights and working-class revolution only in so far as it secures [their] position of power” (Gqola 2004: 116). Communism then fails as the best ideology to resist caste and class discrimination:

The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (Roy 1998: 66-7)

Roy vigorously exposes the inherent contradictions of national organicism in general and of local communities in particular: “And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature” (Roy 1998: 287).

From the outset of the novel, Kerala is presented as an operative community which has commodified its culture and traditions. The degradation and commodification of ancient art forms such as the traditional kathakali performances is frequently criticized in the novel. Kathakali dances are part of the rich Indian culture but in the novel they only serve commercial interests. One of the advertisements of *Paradise Pickles and Preserves* consists in “a kathakali dancer with his face green and skirts swirling” (Roy 1998: 46). Chacko asserts that it gives the product a “Regional Flavour” so that it would hold Indian people in a good position when they enter the Overseas Market. Traditional kathakali performances had also been commercialized and truncated for the tourists, “so ancient stories were collapsed and amputated” and “six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos” (Roy 1998: 127). When the twins go to see a kathakali performance, Rahel reflects that the kathakali Man has entered the market: “He hawks the only thing he owns. The stories that his body can tell. He becomes a Regional Flavour” (Roy 1998: 231). This cultural commodification has led to what Sheena Patchay has called “the erasure, occlusion and distortion of both personal and public histories” (2001: 148)

Roy seems to mourn a certain cultural purity that is lost in the era of globalization and capitalism. Kerala has become a tourist location. Historical palaces are turned into lounges and dining halls and the traditional art of kathakali has become a commercial show that satisfies the tourists’ desire of exoticism. According to Rajeshwar Mittapalli, democracy has become inseparable from capitalism and has therefore lost its meaning and content and, consequently, “the arts have become subservient to commercial interests and lost much of their aesthetic appeal and social relevance” (2018: 45). The Keralan community—and Roy herself—seems to feel a nostalgia for a more archaic community that is increasingly fading, “deploring a loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality” (Nancy 2009: 10). Roy continually presents the caste system, patriarchy, religious and political fanaticism as well as colonialism, as radical, essentialist and confining.

3. The Community of Subalterns

Rahel, the main narrator of the novel, says that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem, or perhaps all the way back when India was not yet colonized by the British. In the novel, Roy uses a non-sequential narrative structure to tell us the secret and forbidden story of the Ipe family, the Small Things surrounding Sophie Mol's death. Roy subverts the idea that history is a tale coherently organized, with a definite beginning, middle, and end. She is offering us an alternative paradigm, one characterized by the presence of "the ahistorical, the unhistorical" (Miller 2001: 79). In its attempt to tell the unofficial version of what happened the night of Sophie Mol's death, the novel combines sequences of analepses and prolepses to resurrect the lost histories of the characters. Roy proves that a large part of what happens in an individual life and in society cannot be diachronically and openly narrated. On the contrary, much of what happens is unhistorical. Where is that nonhistorical element present in the novel? One name for it is the other side of the river where Ammu and Velutha hide themselves to break the Love Laws. It is precisely in this unhistorical space where the unworking of community is conceivable.

In the novel, the natural world—the plants in Kochu Maria's garden, the monsoon rains and the river—surpasses its boundaries and creeps into the civilized spaces. Similarly, love, restricted by the caste system and by verbal and nonverbal social rules, pushes at the peripheries of what is socially acceptable: "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing" (Heidegger 1971: 152). In *The God of Small Things*, genuine love can only be experienced on the verge of society. The Love Laws are transgressed several times and in different ways in the novel since characters like Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel do not mind taking the risk in love, opening up to alterity, unworking community by facing and sharing finitude. It is precisely their out-of-placeness within their family and society "that will make them instruments for revealing the emancipatory potentialities of their location" (Needham 2005: 374). Therefore, the unworked community theorized by Nancy and Blanchot, which manages to break with the general organic community system, is reached in *The God of Small Things* through at least three social transgressions: inter-caste friendship, inter-caste love and fraternal incest.

The first unworked community is the one formed by the sincere and genuine bond established between Velutha and the twins, Estha and Rahel. By portraying their intimate relationships, Roy is turning the reader's attention "to the humanity of the lower-caste characters" (Gqola 2004: 117). Hence, Velutha and the twins represent two kinds of Otherness in the novel. What makes Velutha dangerous is his refusal to be interrelated as a Paravan: his "lack of hesitation," for example, and "an unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel" (Roy 1998: 73). These attributes, which were certainly respected in Touchables, "could (and would, and indeed should) be construed as insolence" in a Paravan (Roy 1998: 73). In the novel, Roy highlights Velutha's humanity, "thus resisting the objectification attached to the label 'Paravan' in her society" (Gqola 2004: 118).

The twins, on their part, are described as "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" (Roy 1998: 45). Probably because of their shared otherness, Velutha and the twins have grown "to be the best of friends" (Roy 1998: 78) and they share a beautiful intimacy in the novel; an intimacy which suggests the unworking of the normative community. Rahel remembers that the government banned their banana jam for being unclassifiable as either jam or jelly, "an ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency." She believes that this event summarizes her family's story: "They all crossed into forbidden territory. [...] this difficulty their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question" (Roy 1998: 31). The strangeness and shared otherness of these outcasts is precisely what founds this community, which is condemned to be temporary and eternally deserted (Blanchot 1998: 54). Thus, Estha will carry with him throughout his whole life the trauma of having been sexually abused by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man in the cinema, and the guilt and mortification of having betrayed his best friend when Velutha was arrested for having broken the most important rule of caste segregation—that there be no inter-caste sexual relations. Estha and Rahel are traumatized witnesses of Velutha's death and the effect that this trauma has on each personality shows the level of trauma induced by their exposure to the abject (Fox 2002: 54).

4. Exposure or the Community of Lovers

The Love Laws are also transgressed by Ammu and Velutha. Ammu is a divorced woman with two children, Estha and Rahel. In the novel she is described as "a woman that they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous" (Roy 1998: 44). She is not resigned to the limits of the law; she has an "Unsafe Edge," an "air of unpredictability" that emerges when she smokes, listens to songs, and even when "her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk" (Roy 1998: 43). And yet, in all the roles that she assumes as a woman—the role of daughter, wife, divorced woman, and mother—she becomes a victim of patriarchy, tradition, community and religion. Ammu proves to have an ardent desire to participate in otherness through "laceration" or exposure of inner selfhood to the outside, one of Nancy's conditions for the unworking of community (Nancy 2008a: 30). This openness is reflected in her love affair with an untouchable, Velutha. Their secret relationship violates the "Love Laws" which the Keralan community inherited from their Hindu past. According to Al-Quaderi and Islam,

Ammu becomes “a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge power structures of the social order” (Al-Quaderi and Islam 2011: 64). Ammu accepts and embraces otherness in difference. She and Velutha start a forbidden and clandestine affair on the other side of the river, the unhistorical element in the novel. The ephemeral aspect of the unworked community is present in Velutha’s dread and in his awareness that their daring transgression of the Love Laws would bring terrible consequences:

Biology designed the dance. Terror timed it. Dictated the rhythm with which their bodies answered each other. As though they knew already that for each tremor of pleasure they would pay with an equal measure of pain. As though they knew that how far they went would be measured against how far they would be taken. So they held back. Tormented each other. Gave of each other slowly. But that only made it worse. It only raised the stakes. It only cost them more. Because it smoothed the wrinkles, the fumble and rush of unfamiliar love and roused them to fever pitch. (Roy 1998: 335)

According to Blanchot, a community of lovers always poses a threat to the organic community. Thus, wherever a community of lovers takes place, “a war machine is set up or, to say it more clearly, the possibility of a disaster carrying within itself, be it in infinitesimal doses, the menace or universal annihilation” (Blanchot 1988: 48). Ammu and Velutha form what Blanchot calls “an unavowable community.” Society does not allow this type of community to utter publicly, in an institutionally sanctioned way, the vows that would seal their love. They are even forbidden to avow in public the liaisons that could be the foundation, for them, of genuine promissory speech acts, of sincere lovers’ vows (Miller 2011: 141).

Therefore, the community of lovers that Ammu and Velutha form is unavowable in the double sense that Blanchot elucidates. First, it has to remain secret, unable to be publicly avowed since it transgresses the Love Laws of Indian society in 1969, those laws “that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (Roy 1998: 33). This is especially the case because inter-caste relationships and marriages threaten the endogamous caste system and suggest the annihilation of caste (Gqola 2004: 111). This type of community has disastrous consequences for the Indian organicist community of Ayemenen. Secrecy and silence, then, surround everything which is connected with this community. Second, this unavowable community is not institutionally protected by any public laws. This is the key to understand the potential of this community of lovers as an unworked, unavowable community: no matter how organic the transfiguration of their community, they are strangers with a capacity to go beyond communitarian and caste boundaries and expose themselves to a different type of otherness.

In their secret encounters on the other side of the river, Ammu and Velutha instinctively stick to the Small Things; they commune with the landscape that surrounds them, devoting their attention to the different insects, and linking their fates and futures to a small spider who lived in a crack in the wall of the verandah of the History House: “They chose him because they knew that they had to put their faith in fragility” (339). There is here a highly evanescent, almost instinctive, understanding of otherness through finitude. The lovers’ fusion is never attained, but this is precisely what distinguishes an unworked community, “a community which does not weave a superior, immortal, or transmortal life between subjects..., but it is... calibrated on the death of those whom we call, perhaps wrongly, its ‘members’... But it does not make a work of this calibration” (Nancy 2008a: 14-15). Thus, the romantic idea of organic fusion is substituted with a more realistic confrontation with finitude and an understanding of reciprocal isolation. The ecstatic moment between the lovers is ephemeral: “The sovereignty of lovers is no doubt nothing other than the ecstasy of the instant; it does not *produce a union*, it is *nothing*—but this nothing itself is also, in its ‘consummation,’ a communion” (Nancy 2008a: 37).

Roy does not submit to romantic idealism and uses symbolic imagery drawn from nature (mainly insects) to convey this refusal. This symbolism epitomizes the community of lovers as an “antisocial society” that is confined in the dichotomy between the “private” and the “public,” and eventually exposes an unworked community. Similarly, this mutual exposure to finitude is characterized by silence: “It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air. But what was there to say” (Roy 1998: 299). This seems to confirm Nancy’s idea that corporeity replaces language in the lovers’ contact. Communication implies that individuals put their separate existence at risk, “placed at the limit of death and nothingness” (Esposito 2010: 146). The bond between Velutha and Ammu forms an elective community since “it exists only through a decision that gathers its members around a choice without which it could not have taken place” (Blanchot 1998: 46-7).

This type of association no longer cares about tradition or any social agreement. Their union cannot be institutionally sanctioned and their community cannot be renewed through marriage. This community challenges and exposes the hypocrisy of the caste system and the double standards that neocolonialism has implanted, as well as disclosing the fundamental aspects of secrecy: guilt, repentance, betrayal, and revenge. This goes hand in hand with Doody’s statement that Eros is the perpetual enemy of socioeconomic arrangements. Hence, although Eros reflects civilization, it “must always be the enemy of what is *called* ‘civilization’ or ‘respectability’ at any particular point” (Doody 1997: 373). However, the organicist Keralan community returns with force to reclaim them: “History’s fiends returned to claim them. To rewrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (Roy 1998: 177). Ammu and Velutha’s genuine community of mortal beings prefigures their impossible communion, but it exposes the lovers to the most dangerous

of risks: “that of losing, along with our individuality, the borders that guarantee its inviolability with respect to the other; of suddenly falling into the nothing of the thing” (Esposito 2010: 140).

The image of Velutha swimming naked and completely unnoticed across the river to the History House is quite symbolic: it represents his daring transgression of the Love Laws and of the caste system. The river functions symbolically as the space in which Velutha can be free, unrestrained by the normative community, the space where the law ceases to operate. When she sees Velutha coming out of the water, Ammu realizes that “the world they stood in was his. That they belonged to it. That it belonged to him” (Roy 1998: 333). Within the river, the Love Laws have no power. Instead of obeying the social and artificial laws made by men, Velutha—like Ammu—follows his own instincts and his own desires. Both Velutha and Ammu know that their unworked community has no future since “[w]hat forms a future, and consequently what truly comes about, is always the singular death” (Nancy 2008a: 13). The night of Sophie Mol’s death, when the police officers arrive at the History House and find Estha, Rahel and Velutha sleeping on the veranda, they beat Velutha savagely. The narrator tells us that “they were not arresting a man, they were exorcizing fear. [...] They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak” (Roy 1998: 309). Velutha has served as a scapegoat for the glorification of the normative community and the restoration of the Ipe family’s reputation. He disturbs the equilibrium of the community and he has to bear the burden of guilt of the community and be sacrificed. Velutha has been selected as a *pharmakos*, a ritual victim who must be expelled in order to purify the Keralan community and render it less disturbing and transgressive. Again, caste supremacy proves to be decisive and those of touchable castes must guarantee the endurance of the caste system by the protection of touchable women and by punishing the Paravans who dare to trespass the limits (Gqola 2004: 114).

René Girard coined the expression “sacrificial crises” to describe the process through which the sacrifice exceeds the limits of the victim and consequently drives the entire society towards violence (1977: 49). Velutha finally becomes “a history lesson for future offenders” (Roy 1998: 336). In Pumla Dineo Gqola’s own words, Velutha is “killed for disloyalty to caste preservation” (2004: 113). He may be read as a martyred Christ figure: “He, too, is a poor carpenter who is betrayed, denied, and finally killed by authorities in a most abject manner” (Fox 2002: 50). Symbolically, Velutha dies for the sins of the Keralan community, one of which is the caste system. Ammu, on her part, also has to pay a lot for her clandestine relationship with Velutha. She is called “Veshya” [“prostitute”] when she tries to free Velutha of charges of murder. She is expelled from her natal house, denied of her rights of inheritance, separated from her children, and reduced to ashes after her tragic death in a hotel. Thus, Ammu and Velutha’s transgressive inter-caste relationship constitute their individualized rebellion against the caste system and it is the site, therefore, of Roy’s political agenda (Needham 2005: 384).

5. Incest, Communication and Counter-History

The last transgressive relationship in the novel is the strong connection between the twins, Estha and Rahel. They are depicted as “a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities” and they used to share experiences, dreams and thoughts. In their infancy, Estha and Rahel form an organic community of blood which is expressed through an organic logic of fusional communion predicated upon exclusion. However, in their adulthood, the twins deconstruct the trope of fusion at the base of all organic communities. When they reencounter each other as adults after twenty-three years, “[t]hey were strangers who had met in a chance encounter” (Roy 1998: 327). Their strong bond finally leads to their making love, and “once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (Roy 1998: 328). Nancy’s premise of transcendent communication in love—the “incessant coming-and-going” where “the singular being is traversed by the alterity of the other, which does not stop or fix itself anywhere” (Nancy 2008a: 98)—is also achieved between them. In fact, they seem to partake of Nancy’s claim that bodies demand “a birthing and a sharing of bodies” (Nancy 2008b: 83).

This epiphanic moment between Estha and Rahel—like Ammu and Velutha’s sexual encounters—is also characterized by the silence represented in Estha’s muteness, confirming again that physicality replaces language in the lovers’ contact. Estha and Rahel open up to each other with a calculated risk. They seem to have forgotten their prejudices, challenging societal restrictive rules and proving that they have a capacity to go beyond communitarian restrictions and exposing themselves to otherness. In consummating her incestuous love for her twin brother, Rahel—like her mother, Ammu—is performing an act of personal and political self-assertion, challenging local inequalities in post-colonial India. Besides, we should remember that due to all his childhood traumas, the adult Estha has stopped talking and that he occupies “very little space in the world,” leading a mediocre existence. Through their incestuous consummation, Roy seems to suggest that communication is possible without the mediating presence of language. The sexual (re)union of Estha and Rahel contains a starting point for communication and healing as well as suggests that healing might come only through radical political change; a change that, though unattainable for the characters, is left in the hands of the readers (Outka 2011: 46).

I think that their final sexual encounter is an attempt on the part of Roy to give voice to Estha through his body, a way of communication which is not biased and which is more authentic and genuine than language, another repressive social code which, besides, led to Velutha’s betrayal. Indeed, Estha carries with him a terrible memory of looking into the face of a beloved “young man with an old man’s mouth” and saying “Yes” (Roy 1998: 32). The absences

and silences surrounding the death of Velutha are literalized in the silence of Estha, who does not talk. In Elizabeth Outka's own words: "Estha has become numb to the present in an effort to forget the past" (2011: 29). He is in fact the silenced "keeper of records" of Velutha's death (Roy 1998: 163). Despite all the sufferings and all the misfortunes that the novel portrays, I find in the last chapter a message of hope, especially in the repetition of the word "tomorrow." Hope because there are people, like Velutha and Ammu, who dare to break the rules, to rebel against an oppressive system no matter how terrible the consequences, and to follow their natural instincts; hope because Rahel speaks back and tells their story; and hope because, by telling their story, Rahel is healing her brother in the same way that Roy is healing her country by writing this novel.

In *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer argues that the fact that the colonized peoples tell their history implies "assuming control," that is to say, taking responsibility for their past, for self-definition, and for political destiny (Boehmer 2009: 187). Taking this into account, we can argue that the twins, Estha and Rahel, represent the two sides of India: the silenced and oppressed part—the one which does not speak back—which is embodied in the character of Estha, and the subversive one—the one which speaks back—which is emblemized by the character of Rahel. Her account of the unofficial story of Sophie Mol's death "frees" Estha as well as "challenges the repression of past memories, causing instead, rapture" (Patchay 2001: 153). Through Rahel's voice, which is female subaltern speech, Roy is insurrecting *subjugated knowledges* (Foucault) which are "even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 2010: 41).

These knowledges lack social pedigree and are hierarchically inferior since they suffer a pervasive social exclusion. They are "knowledges from below" (Foucault 2003: 7). Rahel's discourse constitutes then a counter-history, that is, the dark histories of those people who speak "from the side that is in darkness, from within the shadows." These counter-histories are guided by what Foucault calls "the principle of heterogeneity," and have the following effect: "It will be learned that one man's victory is another man's defeat. [...] What looks like right, law, or obligation from the point of view of power looks like the abuse of power, violence, and exaction when it is seen from the viewpoint of the new discourse" (Foucault 2003: 69-70). Indeed, Roy gives voice to the ostracized people of India and she shows the haunting effects of colonialism through the sympathetic point of view of the oppressed. Rahel's return to Ayemenem signals "the undoing of silences" (Patchay 2001: 153). She discloses the Big Things that have lurked inside many characters in the novel for such a long time while she unveils the Small Things which always pass unnoticed. For Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, the novel presents history "as a dominating, oppressive force that saturates virtually all social and cultural space, including familial, intimate, and affective relationships" (2005: 372). Through Rahel, Roy is then exposing the need to find a restorative and non-imposed history for her country, what Gqola calls "a counter-space" (2004: 118). Her narrative may be read as political intervention that exposes acts of violence. I join Sheena Patchay in contending that *The God of Small Things* contests the official versions of documented History by exposing the untold and secret version of events (2001: 146). By linking History and fiction, the novel demands that History challenges its own distortions and silences. Tellingly, the epigraph of the novel is a John Berger quotation: "Never again will a single story be told as / though it's the only one."

6. Conclusion: "They All Broke the Rules. They All Crossed into Forbidden Territory"

The Love Laws which govern the Keralan society in *The God of Small Things* are deep-rooted in a human need for social attachment and an absorbing need for normative and moral guidance. These Love Laws—which support and sustain caste segregation, patriarchy, religious discrimination—shape the organicist society of Ayemenem. These laws are also sustained by deceptive ideological movements such as communism and capitalism, which perpetuate anti-democratic values and traditional views. But the Love Laws are transgressed several times by Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel, the outcasts of society. These characters open up to alterity and otherness, unworking the organic community system of Ayemenem by facing and sharing finitude through three social and moral transgressions: the sincere and genuine attachment between the twins and the untouchable Velutha; the inter-caste passionate love between Ammu, a divorced and repudiated woman, and Velutha; and the fraternal incest committed by the twins at the end of the novel.

All these characters leave aside their prejudices in order to challenge normative restrictive rules, proving that they can go beyond communitarian constraints and therefore exposing themselves to otherness. Through these forbidden and clandestine relationships, Velutha, Ammu and the twins are performing acts of personal and political self-assertion, challenging local inequalities and discriminations in post-colonial India. For these characters, life is always connected with death and communication is achieved through corporeity. Velutha, Ammu and the twins are capable of sharing themselves with others, despite the risk of being potentially misunderstood and rejected by the operative community. However, communication is also achieved through the mediating power of language, that is, through Rahel's narration of the family history. Rahel's female subaltern speech gives voice to the silenced part of India, demanding that the official history of the country confronts its silences and absences.

To conclude, Roy envisions an alternative community by portraying marginal individuals, singularities who do not fit within the organicist communities and who challenge and confront collectively-sanctioned norms, exposing themselves to solitude and finitude. This unworked community is also suggested at the symbolic level by the constant

presence in the novel of the Small Things: spiders, goosebumps, smells, etc. Through her decision to give an open ending to the novel, Roy challenges all sense of organic closure and, at the same time, echoes the “openness” of the alternative communities which inhabit the novel.

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