

The Elephant-shaped Hole in the Universe:

A literary analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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In this essay, I read Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as a melodrama in order to explore the relationship between the subaltern and the world of everyday life. I draw upon Spivak's conception of the subaltern, her lack of voice and location within both everyday life and the narrative of history. I argue that the main character, Ammu—not speaking the language of everyday life, yet desperately desiring to express herself—is forced to resort to melodramatics, bolstering her incomprehensibility and leaving her even more isolated. I discuss the relationship between post-colonial studies, melodrama, everyday language, skepticism, innocence and knowledge, representations, and the subaltern's opportunity to regain her voice in order to tell her own story.

Keywords: melodrama, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, literary theory and analysis, narrative theory

Is it true that “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (Spivak, 1988, p. 307)? The subaltern, Ammu—ostracized and rejected by her community—is no longer in a position to obtain knowledge about society, and can therefore neither understand it nor speak its common vernacular. In her desperate desire to communicate, she begins over-expressing herself. When she is still not understood, she is effectively forced into isolation. I suggest that it is the responsibility of the reader to question the public narrative, understood as “stories elaborated by and circulating among social and institutional formations larger than the individual” (Baker, 2006, p. 33), to highlight her absent voice.

In this essay, I read Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* as a melodrama. I discuss whether the oppression of the subaltern will inevitably result in a position of skepticism towards the world of everyday life or if the subaltern subject—while not being a part of the depicted fictive everyday world—can ever reacquire her voice to tell her story, and fill the Elephant-shaped Hole in the Universe.

Lack of Locus Standi

As a woman, Ammu’s only chance to free herself from her sinister father’s grip is to go from being in the possession of one man to being in that of another. This drives her into an unhappy marriage with an alcoholic Hindu, and the divorce leads her and her twins, Estha and Rahel, back to their callous family in Kerala, to a status that has depreciated for her to that of a female divorcee “from an intercommunity love marriage” (Roy, 1997, p. 46).

The God of Small Things explores the Small Things in the hybrid space between the Big Things. Ammu’s English niece Sophie’s visit to the family leads to the Big Thing, little Sophie’s drowning, and to the Small Things, the murder of the untouchable Velutha, the banishment of the subaltern Ammu, and the separation of the twins. After their separation, the twins lose their sense of self; Estha withdraws into silence, and Rahel is left desolate and devoid of status in her late mother’s home.

Rahel leaves Kerala for school and silently drifts from place to place and from marriage to divorce. Her American husband recognizes that “her eyes behaved as though they belonged to somebody else,” lamenting that he can never understand her, because “in the country she came from (...), worse things had happened.” (ibid, p. 19). His assumptions serve to reduce her to that of his opposite: something mystical, incomprehensible and completely different to himself.

Homi Bhabha has coined the term, ‘not white/ not quite’ to illustrate Indian men’s perpetual search for their own identities in the hybrid space of post-colonial India. This has often led them to adopting Western mannerisms in an attempt to find a locus within the context of cultural imperialism. However, to recite someone else’s identity is not the same as to experience and make it their own, which is why they remain ‘not white’ and ‘not quite’ (Prakash, 1992, p. 16).

Similarly, Ammu’s brother, Chacko, is in limbo between his former existence as a student at Oxford University, and his current existence as the owner of the local family business in Kerala. He is presented as a man who strives to maintain his po-

sition as a well-read member of the English elite. When he tells “Rahel and Estha that Ammu ha[s] no Locusts Stand I” (Roy, 1997, p. 57), he is paradoxically misquoting the Latin term ‘locus standi’, which in law is used to state “the right of a party to appear and be heard before court” (locus standi, n.d.). This misquotation serves to highlight the discrepancy between Chacko’s real self and his make-believe world.

We can also apply this syndrome to India as a post-colony: India is in a hybrid position, or, as Chacko puts it, “[w]e belong nowhere [...]. And when we try to listen, all we hear is a whispering [...]. A war [...] has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves” (ibid, p. 52-53). However, without a location, from where they to hear and see, it seems impossible for them to regain their voice to speak.

The Public Narrative of History

Spivak defines the subaltern as “everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism – a space of difference” (Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, cited in de Kock, 1992, p. 45). Her essay reveals the dilemma of the subaltern woman; embodying the inferior sex of an inferior culture, she is oppressed not only as the man’s other, but also as the other of cultural imperialism. Her character, her needs, and her desires are defined from the perspective of the ‘white woman’, who in this story is present through the character Sophie Mol – Chacko’s daughter and Ammu’s niece.

In Spivak’s words, the subaltern woman is left at the absolute bottom of the hierarchy, not only as the ‘not white/not quite’, but also as the ‘not quite/not male’ (Spivak, 1985, p. 244). Ammu, because she has no access to first-hand experiences with society, has to adopt their mannerisms from a distance. Appropriately, by adopting these mannerisms in order to be heard, she reinforces her own inferiority, emphasizing herself as unworthy of possessing her own voice.

This resonates with Ranajit Guha’s assertion that history has been institutionalized within Western academia (1997, p. 3). In fact, post-colonial approaches frequently argue that India’s narrative has

been represented from a ‘universal’ perspective as the unknown, mysterious other (Prakash, 1992, p. 9). However, just as Ammu reinforces her own inferior position by subscribing to the public narrative, I contend that this argument effectively reinforces the subaltern position of India, and thus subscribes to a public narrative that presupposes the superiority of the Western perspective.

Spivak affirms that through representations, whatever is left of the subaltern will only be further removed from the narrative of history (1988, p. 70). In other words, Ammu’s silence can only be amplified by somebody else’s attempt to represent her from their own perspective. Instead of being represented by someone else, Guha stresses the subaltern’s need to be an active agent in her own story (1997, p. 11).

However, the demand of the subaltern to process agency in order to be heard collides with the very definition of the subaltern, namely that she “signifies the impossibility of autonomy” (Prakash, 1992, p. 9). With this in mind, the recovery of the subaltern voice seems highly improbable. Yet, Spivak suggests that we, rather than representing the subaltern, can illuminate her lack of location within society and history. This is what she describes as the ‘unlearning project’: Instead of maintaining the narrative we have learned; we should scrutinize it and rip it apart (1988, p. 92).

The Melodrama

Stanley Cavell defines the melodrama as a “locus of ‘excessive’ expressions” –extravagant and theatrical emotional responses founded on the fear of being unable to communicate (1996, p. 40). Ironically, by desperately over-expressing herself, the subaltern Ammu remains unable to express anything at all. Cavell states that “[t]he familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar” (Cavell, 1986, p. 100). As I read him, everyday language is a way to negotiate and establish a common ground for communication, avoiding the unfamiliar and incomprehensible.

The problem is, though, that the subaltern, because she has not been exposed to the world of everyday life, cannot speak its language, and thus remains voiceless. Peter Brooks defines melodrama as a surface covering up fragments of truth, which we can detect and understand only if we activate our emotional apparatus and rely on our intuitive, human emotions (1995, p. 5 and p. 16). In a rather similar vein, Ammu cannot adopt Western mannerisms in order to be understood. However, the reader can acknowledge her existence because of her elaborate emotional expressions.

Based on a fundamental sense of good, empathy, and one's own life experiences, the reader should be able to find a way to connect with the subaltern. By not focusing solely on confirming the public narrative that one has been brought up to trust, one might even be able to hear Ammu's voice, just by virtue of being human. In other words, Ammu's inability to find common ground with her interlocutors can be remedied by her subscribing to the melodrama (Cavell, 1986, p. 112). Thus, even if Ammu remains unknown to her audience in the novel, I suggest that there is a way for the reader to acknowledge her through her melodramatic expression.

Reinforcing the Subaltern Status

The family's position as the subalterns is amplified by the presence of the English Sophie Mol. "On the day that Sophie Mol came, Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol was performed" (Roy, 97, p. 164). In this performance, Sophie's character is reconstructed through the expectations shaped by the family's submitted adornment for the cultural empire. "Sophie Mol [...] walked out of the Play [...]. But the Play went with her. Walked when she walked, stopped when she stopped. Fond smiles followed her" (ibid, p. 186).

The melodramatic expression of the family, when around Sophie, serves to maintain their roles as subalterns, and the distance between them and Sophie is increased as a consequence of their in-

ability to communicate, understand and be understood. In other words, there is no common ground for communication between the family and Sophie.

The twin's mother tongue, Malayalam, is placed at the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy, and must surrender in favor of the British vernacular. Upon Sophie's arrival, the twins are forced into an "Indo-British Behaviors Competition" (ibid, p. 145). They are not only denied the right to speak their own native language; they are also chastised upon their every attempt to exercise the English language, reinforcing their inability to give immediate responses. Under perpetual observation and constant correction, they feel discouraged and insecure, which leads them not only to doubt themselves and their social abilities but also to doubt the very function of language.

After Sophie's death, she is remembered not for who she was, but for who they wanted her to be; with "redbrown hair (N... Nalmost blond), the curve of two fat freckled cheeks (Nnnn... almost rosy), bluegrey-blue eyes" (ibid, p. 174). She is squeezed into the very embodiment of everything that, for the family, symbolizes the West. The treatment of Sophie's memory stands in stark contrast to the treatment of Ammu's. "[T]he church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts [...] Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice [...] The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot. Receipt No. Q498673" (ibid, p. 162-163).

On the other hand, "the Loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive. It was always there" (ibid, p. 16). Sophie's funeral is filled with ceremonial dignity, and her memory in her absence is so immersive that the original Sophie vanishes in its presence. While "the family stood huddled together", Ammu and her twins "were made to stand separately [...]. Nobody would look at them" (ibid, p. 5).

In life, Ammu has faded into isolation, and when she dies, she is removed from the earth in the same manner as "a platoon of ants carried dead cockroach sedately through the door, demonstrating what should be done with corpses" (ibid, p. 162), dispassionately, mechanically, effectively. While Ammu is erased from both society and history, the construct-

ed memory of Sophie Mol is more alive than the original Sophie ever was.

Innocence & Knowledge

“[Ammu] hoped that under [Velutha’s] careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (Roy, 1997, p. 175 - 6). I suggest that Ammu finds refuge in her relationship with Velutha at least in part because of their similar status and their shared enemy. In Cavell’s words, “to know another’s existence by knowing what the other knows is evidently a route for knowing whether your own existence is known, say acknowledgeable” (Cavell, 1996, p. 20).

In other words, Velutha is Ammu’s only chance to be recognized, to realize herself, and to gain new knowledge. When Velutha is murdered, and when everyone turns their back on her, Ammu no longer has anyone to recognize her existence. Thus, she no longer has a reciprocal relationship with the world, which makes her question its existence altogether. To quote Cavell, “what returns after scepticism is never (just) the same” (1986, p.100). Thus, once she stops trusting that there is an external existence, she cannot go back to the way things were, and she cannot obtain further knowledge (ibid, p. 94).

In the process of acquiring knowledge, Ammu is forced to challenge her position, because as a subaltern, she has no other opportunity to gain knowledge about the world. When she touches the untouchable, she breaks the laws of society and leaves her innocence behind. By breaking these laws, Ammu has effectively further increased the distance between herself and the world of everyday life, making herself an outlaw. Besides, she never gains the knowledge she fought for, and her innocence is “buried alive and unable to voice its claim to recognition” (Brooks, 1995, p. 20).

Rahel and Estha, on the other hand, are shielded by their innocent curiosity and their trust in the everyday world. By trusting the narrative into which they have been socialized, by trusting that which

society has generated as parameters of right and wrong, by following its laws and orders and by never questioning its truthfulness, by not challenging their roles or the reality that has been arranged around them. Their characters remain safe, they remain included, or as included as they originally were. Ammu, however, can never again participate in this reality.

From Everyday Language to Skepticism

Previously, I argued that speaking everyday language offers one an opportunity to better obtain knowledge, and to acknowledge one another’s existence. When Velutha is imprisoned and killed, Ammu’s knowledge project is aborted. This is when Ammu starts changing: “That whole morning Ammu talked incessantly. She asked Rahel questions, but never let her answer them [...]. Fear made her garrulous. She kept it at bay with her babble.” (Roy, 1997, p. 160).

Because Ammu’s words are not grounded in the mutual premise of everyday language, it is impossible for Rahel to relate to them. This runs parallel with the family’s theatrics in the presence of their English audience: rather than being able to connect with Sophie, their behavior bolsters their differences. Furthermore, by not revealing their true identities to her, and by resorting to melodramatics, the family’s theatrical performance amplifies their inability to make themselves known to her (Cavell, 1996, p. 40).

This works as an unceasing reminder of the structure of power between the post-colonial characters and the spectator of the cultural empire. The dramatic eruptions act to segregate and create distance between their audience and themselves as actors of a self-perpetuated play (ibid, p. 21 and p. 40). This self-assigned requirement reflects the family’s insecurities, their obligation to demonstrate English manners to their superior visitors thus proving themselves to be on a par with them. They attempt to adopt a Western identity, only to remain ‘not white/not quite’.

Curiously, the more they doubt their ability to reveal their true identities to their audience, and the more they attempt to take on an identity that does not belong to them, the more they seem to resort to melodramatics. Along the same lines, as long as Ammu cannot speak the language of everyday life, she cannot recover her voice. No matter how hard she tries to simulate it, from her isolated position, she can only fade out of existence and memory.

Mindreading versus Everyday Language

After “childhood tiptoed out” (ibid, p. 320), the twins are left to the same fate as their fading mother: one where they digress from a state of innocence within the world of everyday life to a state of silence and skepticism. I argue that speaking everyday language entails an opportunity to come to terms with one’s separateness from others; that the people involved are forced to negotiate the meaning of what they are saying and therefore realize that they are not the same person (Cavell, 1996, p. 43).

In other words, when the twins discontinue their use of everyday language, they are not only expunging the difference between one another, but also their difference from others. “Rahel never wrote. There are things that you can’t do – like writing letters to a part of yourself. To your feet or hair. Or heart” (Roy, 1997, p. 164). In chorus with their transmutation, their use of language changes from playful curiosity in their interaction, to an expectation of absolute understanding for one another, which soon transforms into a language of silence, founded on a shared conviction of mind reading.

Their private language of mind reading implies a general rejection of bodily separation from one another, and possibly also the rejection of their physical presence in the world. This, to reference Cavell (1996, p. 42 and p. 43), can be understood as a denial of a “publicness of a language”, from which only inexpressiveness can follow because private experiences can only be grounded within the framework of society. “It is like searching for the power of a word when the language has been lost”.

When the twins refuse to accept their separateness and dependence upon language as means of understanding one another, they are consequently rejecting their physical bodies, seeing them merely as a limitation to what their minds want to express. In their desire to overcome bodily distinction, the twins effectively claim to be one, and when they are separated, they have no choice but to retreat to silence and fade out of existence because without each other they have no way of knowing that they exist in the world at all.

After Rahel learns that Estha has returned to their childhood home, she goes to Kerala to find her lost history and twin brother in the fragments of old notebooks and memories. As an extension of Rahel’s “(no Plans, No Locusts stand I)” attempt to collect the fragments of their family history (Roy, 1997, p. 231), she purportedly sees herself and her brother as fragments of one personality.

In her attempt to bring Estha back into existence, and to find her own identity, the sexual intercourse between them can be understood as one last, desperate desire to reunite. “Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons [...]. What they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief [...]. Once again they broke the Love Laws” (ibid, p. 328). Rahel’s return to Kerala concludes their history and Ammu’s bedroom becomes the very materialization of both the beginning and the end, one last attempt to obtain knowledge of themselves and each other.

The Public Narrative & the Storyteller

“So, to say that it began when Sophie Mol came to Ayenemem is only one way to look at it [...]. Equally, it could be said that it began thousands of years ago. Before the British took Malabar [...]. That it really began the day the Love Laws were made, the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (Roy, 1997, p. 33). The story belongs to the storyteller – in this case, the author of the novel; she decides what and who to include, what to emphasize or omit. In other words, there is never

just one, public narrative, but several perspectives from which the story can be understood.

So, if the subaltern is inevitably led to silence and skepticism, and skepticism results in an unrecoverable voice, how can we ever be able to hear the subaltern's version of the story? To rephrase Spivak, we cannot intellectualize the subaltern position, nor represent her; if we do, we will inevitably end up coloring her story with our own experiences and intentions. Instead of speaking for her, Spivak (1988, p. 92) suggests that we illuminate the subaltern's lack of location, much like Arundhati Roy has done in her novel.

Ammu and her family, because of their subaltern positions and lack of knowledge about the world of everyday life, are inhibited from speaking its language. Along these lines, they are accustomed to a life unknown to their audience, desperately trying to befit the roles they have been assigned and eventually resort to melodramatic expressions.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed the subaltern position in *The God of Small Things* through everyday language, the public narrative of history, and the melodrama. I have argued that the subaltern's lack of location in the world of everyday life is manifested through her inability to obtain knowledge about the world in which she lives. Devoid of a common language, she grows desperate and eventually takes to melodramatics.

Everyday language serves to establish a common platform between its interlocutors; by virtue of its negotiating nature, we come to terms with our differences from others, realizing that we are not sharing the same conscience, but that we have to compromise in order to meet one another on common ground. The twins, when they stop using everyday language and start relying on mind reading and the confidence of a shared conscience, are effectively expunging the separation between them, others, and the physical world in general. This inevitably leads them into complete isolation and sepa-

ration from their community – a silence from which they cannot return.

When Ammu is not understood and thus left both unknowing and unknown, she becomes doubtful of the function of language and starts drifting towards skepticism, which leads her to silence and self-isolation. Having turned away from society, she is subsequently wiped out of the narrative of history, and as long as she does not speak the language of everyday life, she cannot recover her voice, she cannot be heard, and she cannot hear. As a subaltern, she possesses no agency, and can neither regain her voice to tell her story, nor affect the public narrative of history.

The presence of the English Sophie Mol amplifies Ammu and her family's position as subalterns, and their relationship can be seen as analogous to that between India as a post-colonial entity and the cultural empire as the producer of the public narrative. Ammu has limited to no access to knowledge of her community, and in the presence of Sophie, she is not only 'not white/not quite', but also 'not quite/not male'.

Although Ammu can neither speak for herself nor tell her own story, we cannot speak for her. However, we can fragment the public narrative: as readers, we might not be able to understand exactly what the melodramatic voice of Ammu is trying to express, but by questioning the public narrative into which we have been socialized, we can illuminate the lost voice of the muted subaltern. This is what Spivak refers to as the 'the unlearning project' (1988, p.92): Even if we cannot clearly hear her voice, we can address the elephant in the room and illuminate the Elephant-shaped Hole in the Universe.

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