Something Is Foul in the State of Kerala

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

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IN A VERY GENERAL WAY, space matters in much secondary material on Roy’s novel about three generations of an Indian family, who move to Western countries but return to Kerala. However, few of the articles theorize space or analyse the synchronic and diachronic networks of relationships and trajectories between and within global and local spaces. The present essay combines spatial theories with a postcolonial approach. In the present debate surrounding *The God of Small Things* we can distinguish between roughly five approaches to space: metaphorical, eco-critical, structuralist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial. Sharmita Lahiri, for instance, uses male and female space metaphorically in a rather loose sense, but she does not pay explicit attention to location.¹ In contrast, Pablo Mukherjee reflects on the destruction of the environment and assesses the social consequences.² In a structuralist analysis, Cynthia Carey draws a convincing analogy between the conflict on the level of content and the fragmentation of language:

> the difficult conflict, on the one hand, between the role of man-made places of fixed containment such as the house, and, on the other hand, the dynamic natural places such as the river. The central axis of the book is thus organized around the deadly confrontation, interaction and resistance between these

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places. [...] The old, fixed and fabricated order will be disrupted, fractured and partly transformed by strong natural environmental forces [...].

However, her binary abstraction simplifies the conflict to the transgression of static culture by dynamic nature, space versus time, neglecting how heterogeneous the cultural realm is, and that the ‘forces of nature’, the river and the body, are ‘cultivated’ as well. Ammu’s choices of a husband and lover are motivated at least as much by her resistance to social circumstances as by ‘natural’ desire. Roy reveals that colonial history repeats itself to some extent in independent India. She gives numerous examples of how desire can transgress and subvert the social order or paradoxically transgress and assert: a colonial Englishman abuses an Indian boy, and a lower-class Indian paedophile abuses a middle-class boy; an English manager fathers children with employees, and an Indian employer sexually harasses female workers; a middle-class Indian loves a lower-class Englishwoman, and an Indian middle-class woman seduces an untouchable. Each of these inter- or intracultural relationships violates certain social boundaries of ethnicity, class, and gender, but is tolerated or even endorsed by some and resisted by others, exposing the nexus between power, desire, and the Other.

In a poststructuralist vein, Pramod K. Nayar discusses the psychological and social othering of gender and caste from the highly sophisticated perspectives of the Lacanian ‘imaginary’ and Derridean ‘hospitality’. While the English ex-wife and her daughter are met with hospitality in the Indian family home, the divorced Indian relative Ammu, her children, and the untouchable Velutha are othered and confronted with hostility. The outcasts only find...

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5 However, Arundhati Roy partly reiterates the dichotomy of culture and nature, as when she attributes “civilization’s fear of nature” to the police in The God of Small Things (London: Flamingo, 1997): 308. (Further page references are in the main text.) In a Marxist reading, John Lutz explores the critical potential of the novel well but simplifies the difference between natural desire and a form of desire linked to domination and exploitation, basically inverting the cultural difference between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ desire: Lutz, “Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things,” Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature 42.3 (September 2009): 57–74.