Intimations of Metamodernism

Innocence and Experience in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

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In the dew of small things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.
— Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Introduction

STORIES OF INITIATION AND MATURATION – usually featuring a generic male hero – figure large in modern consciousness, broadly defined. However, postmodern authors, more concerned with challenging established genres and pushing the limits of experimentation, seem less attracted to stories of coming-of-age, or *Bildungsromane*. When they do occur in postmodern fiction, such stories may take the form of “neurotic, or provocatively and subversively ironic female initiation under the rules of decadent patriarchy in the context of fin-de-siècle intertextual references.”¹ Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997)

qualifies as such an instance of female initiation despite self-indulgent male domination. However, Roy’s novel is noteworthy not only for questioning the rules of patriarchal India, but also for making a transition from postmodern to metamodern fiction. More than ironic, fragmented, self-referential, open-ended or disgruntled with metanarratives, *The God of Small Things* belies postmodern scepticism and indicates that stories do have meaning, and living, telling or remembering them can aid one’s self-realization.

The journeys that Roy’s characters, specifically Ammu, Estha, and Rahel, undertake in *The God of Small Things* have obvious initiatic connotations: they leave and return to natal Ayemenem changed or impaired, enriched or carrying death in their souls and bodies. These initiations involve not only individuals but whole communities that are forced to grow out of their conditioning or prejudices.

Investigating the part played by dissent and boundary transgression in the postcolonial story of maturation, this essay addresses the possibility of self-realization in the tense relationship between the postcolonial experience and the European or traditional views on education and coming-of-age. Self-fulfilment seems extremely unlikely in Roy’s novel, where death and unrequited homosexual love, cross-caste love affairs, and separations usher in an age of experience and trauma, of guilt and social rejection.

Fulfilment is not sought, however, only on the level of characters’ selves. History itself becomes a character, its unfolding paralleling the development of individuals’ stories. History and people’s lives alike follow a spiral-like pattern of innocence sacrificed for the sake of experience, followed by a return to innocence of a kind. The role of the mother in catalyzing the initiation doubles that of circumstances and history in precipitating the coming-of-age, whereas attempting to regain her child-like

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2 Although Indian ‘outward’ society is undoubtedly patriarchal, there is a sense in which the ‘inward’ society, occupying the less visible sphere of home life, often gravitates around feminine presence. Jean–Pierre Durix acknowledges the centrality of women to Roy’s fictional universe when he notes that “very strong women characters [...] play major parts in the plot.” See Durix, “The Post-Coloniality of *The God of Small Things*,” in Carole Durix & Jean–Pierre Durix, *Reading Arundhati Roy’s “The God of Small Things”* (Dijon: Presse Universitaire de Dijon, 2002): 9.