

**DECONSTRUCTING INDIA VS PAMPERING THE WEST: A RE-READING OF
ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

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Abstract

Roy's much celebrated novel, The God of Small Things is a multifaceted work of art which can be read and re-read in many different means. Written from a postmodernist perspective, it deals with the social ethos of the Syrian Christian community living within the Marxist oriented state of Kerala, Roy's subject matter in the novel which deals with a plethora of issues dealing with caste, untouchability, the political hypocrisy of the Marxists, the world of children, the industrialization of cottage industries and associated issues of exploitation deconstructs the ethos and texture pertaining to what is known to be the largest democracy in the world. Whilst doing that she experiments with the narrative style and has used language so innovatively in depicting her subject matter that we feel that it is an act of writing back i.e writing back to the Empire. But even though this is considered ground breaking, it is questionable as to whether her deconstructed version of India is wallowed in what one would term as postcolonial exotica where material from the "orient" is used subtly to pamper the Western audience whilst meeting the political demands of the global print houses. Thus, our attempt in this paper then is to analyze this very aspect pertaining to God of Small Things.

Keywords:-Exotica, Post-colonialism, Politics, Postmodernism, Writing back

**DECONSTRUCTING INDIA VS PAMPERING THE WEST: A RE-READING OF
ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

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The *God of Small Things* is a multifaceted novel. Written from a postmodernist perspective, it deals with the social ethos of the Syrian Christian community living within the so called Marxist oriented state of Kerala. Roy's subject matter in the novel deals with a plethora of issues like caste, untouchability, political hypocrisy of the Marxists, the world of children, industrialization of cottage industries and associated issues of exploitation. She then actually deconstructs the ethos and texture pertaining to what is known to be the largest democracy in the world. Whilst doing that she experiments with the narrative style and has used language so innovatively in depicting her subject matter that we feel it is an act of writing back i.e writing back to the Empire. But even though this is considered ground breaking, it is questionable as to whether her deconstructed version of India is wallowed in what one would term as postcolonial exotica where material from the "orient" is used subtly to pamper the Western audience whilst meeting the political demands of the global print houses. Our attempt in this paper is to analyze this by re-reading the novel from a deconstructive perspective.

The research question which we attempt to address here is a binary itself when it comes to post-colonial theory. On the one hand, while the use of cultural elements can come across as something used with a reason to counter the hegemonic discourses of the West, on the other it can be heavily misused. It's imperative that such "misuses" will eventually lead to exoticization and pampering of the Western audience which then will turn out to be a comic reversal of what it "ideally" ought to be. In this regard, Helen Tiffin points out that 'process of artistic and literary decolonization have involved a radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses' ("Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter Discourses" 99). Given the level of epistemic violence and the nature of the relationship between the colonized and the colonizers, such an outcome would be the "ideal". But when countering such systematically created epistemically violent discourses, is there any way of going back to or attempting to find a pure culture? That itself becomes an exotic project as such cannot exist.

If we take a look at the context of India, the notion that literature should be revised and taught comes to the fore in 1831 with the Charter Act. Even though the Charter Act did not specify what it meant by literature, Thomas Macaulay seized on the opportunity and argued that 'the phrase clearly meant Western literature' (Vishwanathan 432). With the passing of the higher education act in 1835 and the India being opened up for missionary activities enabled the creation of brown sahibs in order to work the local systems. The beginning of English education in India assured that the Raj will function not only on power and the force of the bullet, but through intellectual means. The ideology always promoted the superiority of the Western European systems as they were shown to be scientific, rational, logical and marketable. Macaulay had this to say about English in his famous minute on Education. 'Whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth, which all the wisest nations of the earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations' ("Minute on Indian Education" 428). As a result of this English got attributed with a certain power and access to that particular discourse meant that one could wield authority. While subjugation took place within the context of India at such hegemonic levels, it was necessary to keep the British population continuously supporting this process. As liberal ideas along with modernist secularism were gaining popularity, it was necessary to show that the Indian population by far required undergoing a process of social reengineering where they would be taken out from their "barbaric" existence. The fact that new forms of knowledge had to be "taught" to them to relinquish them from such a miserable fate was of equal importance as educating the natives. We then find a vast production of orientalist literature, written in a very specific manner, to appease as well as justify the white man's burden due to this political scenario. As Sara Suleri points out:

from the vast body of eighteenth-century historical documentation of British rule in India to the proliferation of Anglo-Indian fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the narratives of English India are fraught with the idiom of dubiety, or a mode of cultural tale-telling that is neurotically conscious of its own self-censoring apparatus ("The Rhetoric of English in India" 107).

This creation of an orientalist discourse then had to be dismantled with the onset of decolonization as it became a necessity in attempting to find an identity to the nation with the onset of nation building. Decolonization here becomes a process of invoking 'an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dismantling' (Tiffin 99). A rewriting and a rereading of this orientalist discourse then become an absolute necessity and these practices which are subversive then become the main feature of post-colonial texts and their writers. In doing so, they challenge the notions of literary universality and

attempt to produce counter discourses to the logo centric truths presented by the centers of power. This production of a counter discourse now has become a career for many. East has become a career and as Bruce Robbins points out

thanks largely to the path-breaking work of Edward Said, it is now possible for intellectuals from what used to be called “the East,” as well as from the metropolis, to make a metropolitan academic career out of transmitting, interpreting, and debating representations of what is now called (with no more precision) the “Third World”(“The East is a Career: Edward Said and the logics of Professionalism” 48).

This career then would mean power, status, academic stability and stature along with money. Hence, the literature produced by the “third world” runs the risk of acting as agents of recolonization or neo-colonial forces due to the capital involved within the industry. As Helen Tiffin points out, these literatures ‘consciously or unconsciously reinvoke those very hegemonic assumptions against which the post-colonial text has, from its inception, been directed’ (“Post-Colonial literatures and Counter-Discourse 100). If such an ironical reversal does take place, it then becomes a colonizing agent of its own which then acts as detrimental to what it fundamentally stands for.

We can see clearly the theoretical positioning of post-colonial work and the possible interpretative avenues of such work. It is categorically placed within the stark binary of creating a counter discourse and the Hugganian concept of exoticism where the margins are marketed for various neo-colonial and capitalist requirements. Within this binary then, where does Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* stand? As a novel written on a particular context, representing a particular people and a particular social milieu how can we as critics and readers analyze the book?

The narrative critiques the ethos pertaining to the Syrian Christian community and the texture of political Marxism governing the state. Though there are fleeting moments of joy and laughter, generally, there is a sense of loss and negativities all around. As critics then, it is questionable as to how one can draw a fine political line between what is exotic and what the counter discourse is. Criticism itself is a relative political act and is not solely objective. It’s always tinged with subjective political stances and what we will attempt to do in this paper is to avoid such a rigid polemic stance and try to analyze the discourse critically on its own merits without imbibing polemic truth values to it.

If we attempt to analyze *The God of Small Things* in this light, the overall narrative style of the novel deserves analysis as it employs a post-structural means. The narrative does not move in a linear fashion, but jumps from one point to another. It ‘offers two central and interwoven narrative threads’ (Outka 4). The first thread presents various problems faced

by an Indian family living in Aymenem around the late 1960's. Ammu, Chacko, Mamachchi, Baby Kochamma, the twins along with Sophie Mol and Margret Kochamma are presented within that narrative where various calamities affect the family. Sophie Mol drowns, Velutha is killed after getting beaten up by the police due to the inter-caste love affair, Estha gets molested by an orange-drink, lemon drink man while in the cinema and Ammu gets banished from the family and dies. The second narrative begins in a day somewhere in 1993 where we see Estha and Rahel meeting up for the first time after these violent events. This meeting too ends up in an incestuous sexual relationship. Other than these, various other narratives are intertwined within them and Roy takes great pain to show these stories in alternative chapters. Each chapter moves back and forth over various time periods which create a complex set of references and allusions. The story line is saturated with flashbacks and we find all kinds of past events returning to haunt the present. We find the temporal to be mixed and not a continuous thing which moves in an ultra linear fashion. This narrative style becomes a very important critical exercise in writing a post-colonial counter discourse. The lack of a linear uniformity metaphorically alludes to the fact that nothing is set which makes meaning rarely concretized allowing free play within the structures. This style then eventually helps in destabilizing the logo centric homogenous outlook the West imposed on the East in creating the orient. It symbolically shows that the linear narratives presented by the West would be gross misrepresentations and simplified overgeneralizations.

If we take a look at the characters and their experiences in *The God of Small Things*, they are victims of various traumatic experiences. They are part and parcel of the larger socio-political tyranny inflicted upon them by the imposed colonial state institutions along with ideology. Interestingly, what we find are the liberal institutions working on a Marxist environment where the local social stratifications play a major role. Ideally, if the state was Marxist, the institutions should have changed in texture. Leave out the institutions, there could have been no room for caste and class issues to spring up this violently. What we find in Kerala then is a strange form of governance which is somewhat mutated. This alone is enough to traumatize various sections of the population and, as Outka point out 'one of the most noted after effects of traumatic experience is, infact, a disordering of time, when past events threaten to take over the present, returning repeatedly to haunt the current moment in the form of flashbacks, hallucinations or dreams' ("Trauma and Temporal hybridity in Arundathi Roy's *The God of Small Things*" 4). This then metaphorically alludes to that fact that the post-colonial refashioning of the state within India cannot hark back to anything which can be identified as a pure history. Histories are intertwined, retold, refashioned and almost forgotten. The individual trauma of the characters allude to the trauma the individual nation state, and the federal state of Kerala has to undergo in trying

to create anything akin to nationhood. This is very much close to the position taken by writers such as Salman Rushdie where the creation of history is always problematized.

In the larger scheme of things, we can justify Roy's approach in forming the narrative in this fashion. It then appears as both a critique against the monism and the strict binaries created by the West as well as a critique of the post-colonial nation building process pertaining to the larger nation of India and its constituent federal state of Kerala. But then, the problematics come up when we look at the incidents taken by Roy to show the traumatic experiences the characters undergo due to various structural issues present within societal politics. That is where the difficulty comes up in distinguishing between what is exotic and what adds substance to the narrative it presents. For example, when we look at how the minuscule community within Kerala is presented, there is almost nothing positive projected about it. The river bank smells of shit and it is said that the fish have died due to the pesticides brought with the World Bank loans. Then we find a description of 'new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places' (Roy 13). The comment on pesticide bought by World Bank money clearly is an ironic comment on the so called Marxist state's hypocritical politics. This single line shows that the state has aligned with the World Bank policies pertaining to agriculture. Furthermore, the next section talks about migration of the working population to the Arabian Gulf in search of better living standards and sustenance. Again the state with the highest human development index has failed to provide its population with adequate employment opportunities. The people themselves are living the capitalist dream where they are shown to build huge houses. This critique continues and the narrator talks about Estha walking past an unnamed village school established for the untouchables and the named Tender Buds Nursery School for the touchable. Even though the lines are short, the implied meanings are poignant and strong. One can see how political meanings and social mobilization is severely trapped within the structure and how their definitions have been subtly established and concretized. The school for the untouchables remain nameless i.e. is not attributed an identity removing all senses of belonging to that particular context. Quite contrary to this, the upper caste touchable school has a quite trendy Western name and identity. Roy from the onset then questions the politics of the Marxists. In the same section, the narrator talks about the once communist party headquarters in Ayemenem where midnights study meetings and the printing of Marxist pamphlets took place. The irony deepens when the narrator says that 'the flaks that fluttered on the roof had grown limp and old. The red had bled away' (Roy 13). Thus, it becomes evident that what ran the system was crony capitalism hidden beneath the leftist rhetoric of equality. Even Chacko, the so called Oxfordian Marxist on his return makes their small cottage industry into a (un)successful capitalist venture by

turning it into paradise pickles and preserves by attempting to mechanize it. Despite his notions on humanity and equality, he sexually exploits the young women who come to work in the factory. All in all, a tinge of socialism is not evident within his behavior and practices. This bleeding away of the red becomes more evident when we take a look at how Comrade Pillai treats Velutha in his hour of need. When Chacko meets Comrade Pillai and broaches the issue of Velutha, he immediately states that 'paravan is going to cause trouble for you' (Roy 278) and asks Chacko to get him a job somewhere else. When questioned why, he points out that other workers are not happy with him because he receives special treatment from the rest of the family. The specialty of this treatment is questionable, as he is only allowed in the house from the back door to do menial work like fixing things. Without trying to appease the rest of the workers, his simple way of trying to get rid of him exposes the level of socialism Comrade Pillai subscribes to. Even when the police question him about Velutha, he abandons him and states that he is not even a party worker and that he does not hold a card. Thus, it becomes evident as to how the so called Marxist party exploits the workers who actually ought to be their political base and serve them on a platter to the capitalist class in order to maintain the status quo. Eventually, the Marxist political leader, the high caste upper class family members and the institutional state apparatus (as in the police) get together to maintain the very system which the Marxist should have attempted to overthrow. The abuse of Estha should be seen in this light. While the element of sexual gratification would be there, it is more likely an act of using power over an upper caste, upper class boy by a less fortunate lower class human being. The resentment of that particular class becomes evident in that act. Hence, the negativities are shown through deconstructing the State of Kerala in relation to such hypocrisies appears far from being exotic.

If we leave the political and take the personal into account, the relationships among people become evident. Again, if we take a look at Ammu and Chacko, their marriages failed prematurely. Rahel gets divorced and Baby Kochamma remains single, thwarted by a lost love. Even the grandparent's relationship is an abusive one where the grandmother gets constantly beaten up. What's interesting is that Roy, creates two spaces oscillating between the nature vs culture binary where these relationships operate. While the majority of affairs all take place in what one would term as a "cultural space" the relationship shared by Ammu and Velutha takes place in "nature". Roy places that relationship in a Foucauldian heterotopia away from culture, across the river or in a boat floating on the river to metaphorically show that such relationships cannot take place within the strict code of conduct established by societal norms within the Syrian Christian Kerala culture. One problem with this relationship is that it lacks a motive to take place as Roy does not develop it or let it develop. We simply find them making love all of a sudden which then

takes the credibility away from the transgressive touchable-untouchable relationship. It's simply put there and even though the act of consummation is presented artistically, the way it is used tends to make exotic. The other problematic comes up when we look at their eventual fate. They both are destroyed by the system they try to challenge. So, again, does this mean that such political acts of cultural transgression cannot be possible at all means within such a context? Isn't resistance ever possible within India? Is this then an instance where India is served up on a platter to the West to be consumed with relish on the grounds of brutality and archaic cultural norms? This then becomes questionable. Furthermore, the incestuous union between Estha and Rahel are again questioned on the very same grounds. Interestingly, one can argue that it was necessary in order for the twins to reconnect and to make Estha his life back. But again, the same can be countered on the grounds we mentioned earlier, that again, it can be an act of exotica which the West would love to hear about the non-western contexts.

If we leave the political and the personal out, Roy depicts certain other cultural elements. Interestingly, Kottayam is situated within a huge network of waterways which she leaves out. But she devotes a considerable portion in one chapter in describing a Kathakali dance. The detailed description is clearly for a non-Indian audience and one can safely say that she is clearly writing back to the West by showing that India too is home to a gamut of set cultural practices as opposed to what the West showed it to be i.e. as an uncivilized space lacking in any form of culture. Again, the problem here is not about the depiction, but whether it adds anything more to the narrative. Even without the description of the Kathakali dancing, the novel can be read safely. Again, one wonders whether she is mining for artistic potential or whether she is actually attempting to show a certain thing about the Indian culture.

Even though a multitude of examples were not taken, within the theoretical position we adapted, it can be seen that it becomes a daunting task to place Roy within the binary of somebody who deconstructs the social ethos of India or as a person wallowing in exotica. In the larger scheme of things, her analysis is sharp and profound. But at times, as discussed above, it tends to be somewhat questionable. It is up to us to constantly re-read her work because the meanings are not set like her narrative style.

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