

## The Third Space in “The God of Small Things”

### *El Tercer Espacio en “El Dios de las Pequeñas Cosas”*

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Manuscrito recibido: 17 de agosto de 2019; aceptado para publicación: 6 de septiembre de 2019

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#### **Abstract**

*The God of Small Things* presents the reader with characters interacting in a complex hybrid space, in which different binary oppositions operate at the same time and pervade the mindsets of the ones involved. They seek, through action and language, to either define or reassert their identity in an ambivalent place, which sometimes entails fighting against the social pressures and deeply entrenched cultural hierarchies. It is the aim of this paper to analyze this complex context from a postcolonial perspective and to explore new paradigms of identity.

**Keywords:** hybrid, binary oppositions, postcolonial, identity

#### **Resumen**

*El Dios de las Pequeñas Cosas* presenta personajes interactuando en un complejo espacio híbrido, en el cual distintas oposiciones binarias operan al mismo tiempo y penetran la mentalidad de los involucrados. Los mismos buscan, por medio de la acción y del lenguaje, definir ó reafirmar su identidad en un lugar ambivalente, lo cual a veces implica luchar en contra de las presiones sociales y las jerarquías culturales profundamente arraigadas. El presente artículo analiza este complejo contexto desde una perspectiva postcolonial y explora nuevos paradigmas de identidad.

**Palabras Clave:** híbrido, oposiciones binarias, postcolonial, identidad

#### **Introduction**

I was expected to explain in my paper the ways in which the novel I chose did justice to the name of this conference, “Writing for Liberty”. I started by thinking the reason why they chose the word “liberty” and not “freedom”. I discovered that “freedom” is a more concrete concept than “liberty”, as the first one means to be free from something specific, for example, slavery. “Liberty”, on the other hand, is defined as

“the right and the power to believe, act, and express oneself as one chooses, of being free from restriction, and having the freedom of choice”. In the literary field, when you think about the act of writing and storytelling, you are indeed exercising your liberty. You are free to choose what to tell, how to tell it, what to include and what to exclude. Norman Fairclough, a retired Professor of Linguistics and one of the founders of critical discourse analysis, explains how discourse is

inextricably related to power. He says that “language is a socially conditioned process, continued, that is, by other (non-linguistic) parts of society” (Fairclough, 2001). He adds that “power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants” (Fairclough, 2001). In psychological terms, language is the core of our self-definition. We use language in order to convey our essential being. Language is also the channel through which we construct meaning. However, it is important to understand that this process of self-definition does not occur in isolation. Languages are influenced, shaped and curbed by cultural and political struggles.

What is the role of literature under this light? Postcolonial theory states that literature should be seen as the vehicle of ideology and the demand for nationhood. Rather than expecting universal characteristics from literature, we should talk about national literatures with their own preconceptions and systems of value. This concept entails a displacement from a eurocentric perspective, i.e., a rejection of a single interpretation of meaning. Postcolonial writers are trying to deconstruct the naturalized single story. Endorsing a single centre of meaning deprives us from our rightful liberty and creativity. Manichean views of the world and people prevent us from seeing the grayscale; we fail to hear other voices, those ones which are marginalized because they do not fit an accepted centre. In *The God of Small Things*, the creative use of language precisely aims at deconstructing deeply engrained thoughts about human relations that lurk behind cultural tensions.

It is no surprise that *The God of Small Things* was both harshly criticized and highly praised. While *The New York Times* rated it as a “dazzling and extraordinary first novel”, *The Guardian* described it as “profoundly depressing”. In India, the book was condemned especially for its unrestrained description of sexuality. In fact, *The God of Small Things* is not just a novel, it is the discourse of a minority (or all the minorities, if you wish), a call for liberation and resistance. It was written by Arundhati Roy, an Indian author and political activist. From the very beginning, the epigraph foreshadows the main concern of the novel, that of writing back to the empire: “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one” (John Berger, 1972). The author

seems to warn us from the very beginning about the multiple layers of meaning that we, readers, will have to dismantle. The central events of *The God of Small Things* are pretty straightforward, but once you break down the non-linear plot, you can appreciate the complexity by the number of points of view clashing and working together.

### **Imperialism pervading culture**

In *The God of Small Things*, ideology is not an element which unites the characters of Ayemenem. On the contrary, as the story unfolds, the reader identifies two antagonistic, irreconcilable groups in this society. Intuitively, one would say these groups can be identified in terms of the social stratification corresponding to the caste system in India. Along these lines, the reader encounters the *Touchable*s (the Ipe family: Mammachi, Pappachi, Ammu, Chacko, Estha and Rahel) and the *Untouchable*s (Velutha and his father, Vellya Pappen). So deeply entrenched is this social stratification in the minds of the characters that they are to live accordingly to certain principles.

In her novel, Arundhati Roy attempts to disclose the pressure exerted upon social interaction by means of the so called “Love Laws”: “. . . That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much” (Roy, 1997: 42). Notwithstanding their concealment (they are never referred to explicitly by the characters), these rules are powerful constraints on human relationships and are not supposed to be broken since they are as anchored as the laws of nature. In fact, the Indian caste system is based on cultural notions of purity and pollution. In Chandra (2005), a caste is defined as a social group having two characteristics: (1) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born; (2) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. In India, the social ranks are part of a very rigid and strict institution that promotes the feelings of high and low in society. Hence, it can be concluded that the Love Laws in the novel respond to the binary and hierarchical logic of imperialism, understood as “that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance” (Ashcroft et al, 1998:24).

Accordingly, the only ones who deserve to be loved and

respected seem to be the representatives of the dominant bloc, in this case an English character: Sophie Mol, Chacko's daughter. Chacko's family becomes really excited about her visit and they think of ways in which they can make Sophie feel at home. On her arrival in Ayemenem, Sophie is warmly welcomed by everyone and she is given a cake with the message "Welcome home our Sophie Mol" (Roy, 1997: 81). The twins are also encouraged to sing in English in order to impress her. It becomes evident from the very beginning that the Ipe family's love and admiration for Sophie lies in her *Englishness*. For example, Baby Kochamma conveys from the very beginning that Sophie is beautiful and outshines the twins.

'Tell me, are you a pretty girl?' Mammachi asked Sophie Mol

'Yes' Sophie Mol said.

'And tall?'

'Tall for my age', Sophie Mol said.

'Very tall', Baby Kochamma said. "Much taller than Estha"

'She's older', Ammu said.

'Still...' Baby Kochamma said" (Roy, 1997: 174)

The notion of Love Laws is also applied to the use of language. In fact, English is used to impress the other characters and to hint at a higher education. For instance, when Sophie and Margaret arrive in Ayemenem the twins are encouraged to sing English songs. This perception of Western culture as good and correct can be explained by means of colonialism and imperialism. In fact, the novel revolves around different binary oppositions, ranging from race and purity to culture: West/East, Touchable/Untouchable, English/ Malayalam. In *The English Studies Book*, Pope defines binary oppositions as: "Seeing and saying things in terms of extreme oppositions and 'either/or' (digital) logic: on or off, black or white, masculine or feminine, up or down, internal or external, subject or object, this or that, now or then, here or there, etc." (Pope, 2002:392) Binary oppositions operate in a hierarchical system in which the first term of each opposition is associated to superiority and hence granted supremacy. In other words, every concept associated to the colonized has an inferior rank whereas what represents the colonizer is empowered.

### Crossing the border

It seems that developing one's identity in *The God of Small Things* is a question of choice for some characters; they have to decide whether to uphold an oppressive hierarchical social system or disrupt it. There are characters such as Baby Kochamma and Pappachi who mimic the colonizer all along, thus advocating a dominant mode of representation. In Roy's terms, these characters represent the "Big Things", namely grand narratives that govern Indian society and mentality. On the other hand, there are characters who find an escape route in the "Small Things", which can be understood as everything that either contradicts or disregards the Big Things. For example, Ammu, Velutha and the twins Estha and Rahel feel and do things that society in general rejects as inadequate, and they pay the price for that. Ammu tries to hide her growing feelings for Velutha, but he is also in love with her. Velutha's affair with Ammu is in contravention of the status quo, and therefore has to be punished. What seems to be unfeasible in Ayemenem is the evasion of binary oppositions; either you are part of the center or part of the margin, self or other, loved or not loved. If one does not respect one's social position, they will be rejected and punished. Affinity for Small Things proves to downplay oppositionality, for it enables the creation of a "third space of enunciation" (Bhabha, 1994), that is to say, a place where people are not forced to follow the precepts of the colonial discourse because it intimately belongs to them. In that regard, Bhabha (1994) poses that cultural identity always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space. The inhabitants of the third space forge a new cultural identity by being different and self-aware at the same time. In postcolonial terms, this is related to the concept of "hybridity": "Hybridity commonly refers to new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc." (Ashcroft et al, 1998:118) Language is a powerful tool to combat oppression of the Big Things, especially by means of linguistic hybridity, which is directly related to the concept of performativity. Indeed, the utterances of the characters do not simply report on or describe reality; they are illocutionary acts that build on identity. Far from being an adornment to language, the inclusion of words in another language can be said to

represent the rebellion to imperialism and the exclusion of the colonizer. In fact, a speaker of English who is not fluent in Malayalam will probably not understand some passages in the novel which mix English and Malayalam, and this can lead to frustration because they are being denied of the possibility of understanding those lines. In postcolonial terms, Roy creates a metonymic gap: “that cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert un glossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references that may be unknown to the reader” (ibid:137). At the same time, it is also possible to identify in this metonymic gap an act of retaliation, a resistance to interpretation. The characters that are able to express themselves both in English and Malayalam gain agency, for they have independence to make choices as regards language use; and this is precisely their way of wielding power over the colonizer. The latter is excluded by the former, thus reversing the roles of the colonial power dynamics. It is in this sense that language in this novel is the key to power and freedom in the third space. Estha and Rahel create another kind of metonymic gap by reading backwards. “There are many ways in which the language can do this: syntactic fusion; neologisms; code-switching; untranslated words.” (Roy, 1997: 137) When the twins see road signs, Rahel says “POTS” (ibid: 58) instead of “stop” and Estha says “NAIDNI YUB, NAIDNI EB’ (ibid: 58) instead of “Be Indian, Buy Indian”. They repeat the same pattern with a book they have been given since it is too babyish compared to the ones they like: “ehT serutnevda oF eisuS lerriuuqS.enO gnirpS gniroM eisuS lerriuuqS ekoW pU” (ibid: 60) In this case, the metonymic gap contains mimicry in the sense that it mocks the conventions of Standard English. Baby Kochamma, a defender of English culture, perceives the menace in this metonymic gap, and decides to have the twins punished. They are made to write “In future we will not read backwards” (ibid: 60). Baby Kochamma and Pappachi seem to strive to be classified by an external gaze, and thus adopt an English mindset. On the other hand, Chacko renounces to this claim for label even though he indirectly acknowledges and upholds it. Alternatively, Velutha, Ammu, Estha and Rahel deviate from the norm, cross ideological borders and bear with the burden of social contempt for the sake of a free and hybrid subjectivity.

## Conclusion

As was previously suggested in the introduction, messages in Roy’s *The God of Small Things* cut across the personification of characters and the events in the plot. Roy has probably set out to write this novel in order to give a voice to the subaltern subjects by means of a literary decolonization. Literature constitutes a site for struggle in which language becomes a fundamental tool of resistance. Writers create novels and poems that respond to their immediate cultural environment. Roy explores the submission of the colonized subjects while at the same time introduces the concept of the third space by means of a cunning exploitation of linguistic devices. The cultural and ideological invasion of Englishness asserts its control by an obfuscated and hegemonic process of othering the colonized subjects. In the context of *The God of Small Things*, hegemony is accepted by Baby Kochamma and Pappachi, and thus mimic the colonizer with the ultimate goal of feeling part of the British Empire. Their adoption of Standard English and English customs is the result of their obsession with accent and caste. Chacko, notwithstanding his heightened awareness of imperial discourse, sometimes appears to be absorbed by its oppressive force and he is subsequently led to diminish his own Indianness. Alternatively, Velutha, Ammu, Estha and Rahel overcome dichotomies of bigotry by using language performatively, which aims at deconstructing and ultimately defying mainstream construction of meanings and values. Literature constitutes in this respect a third space, a gap, a hybrid space of transgression and subjectivity, proposes new paradigms of interpretation and calls for human liberty.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my teacher of Language IV in my teaching training course, Daniel Ferreyra, who gave me the tools to understand and dig into the roots of such a complex yet magnificent novel.

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