

**“For practical purposes in a hopelessly practical world...”: Towards a New  
Postcolonial Resistance in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things**

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Abstract: As an Indian writer writing in English, Arundhati Roy struggles to free her text from the influence of Western colonial and economic powers. Through her use of language, bodies, and performance, Roy seeks to create an alternative world in which the constructs of colonizer and colonized, First World and Third, no longer limit her. Roy’s resistance to defined boundaries is her first step towards creating such a world and takes many forms in The God of Small Things. Yet, it is only through valuing all of these forms, despite their seemingly oppositional nature, that Roy will find the means to create an alternative space in which she and her text can finally be free.

## INTRODUCTION

Chapter Twelve of Arundhati Roy's novel, The God of Small Things, tells simply of a secretive performance of two kathakali dancers in a lonely temple. It is late at night and the dancers perform for no audience but themselves, their gods, and two of the novel's main characters, Estha and Rahel, who are hidden from sight. After a long afternoon of performing Westerner-friendly versions of their sacred stories beside the swimming pool at a nearby resort, Roy writes, "they stopped at the temple to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encasing their identities. Misappropriating their lives" (218). She describes how, in their performance, the dancers are "Like children in a warm house sheltering from the storm" (223). These are resonant words for Roy who feels, as do the dancers she writes of, that she has betrayed her culture by performing for a Western audience. Roy herself takes shelter in this chapter, using it as a space to address her feelings of guilt. Yet this chapter also becomes something more. Nestled within the chaos of Roy's narrative, this chapter stands out as a moment in which the reader may pause and reflect. Contained in its deceptively simple pages, in which almost no plot advances occur, the reader finds that Roy has created a space in which to consider the many questions raised by the novel. Prompted by the text, the reader must reflect on her own misgivings about author intention and consider a deeper message hidden in this performance. Of the Kathakali Man, Roy writes,

If he had a fleet of makeup men waiting in the wings, an agent, a contract, a percentage of the profits – what then would he be?... Would his money grow like a rind between himself and his story? Would he be able to touch its heart, its hidden secrets, in the way that he can now? (220)

Like her dancer, Roy must cut her way through the "rind" that has grown over her story, obstructing the reader's vision of what she is truly attempting with this chapter and her

entire novel. The chapter becomes more than a space for Roy to examine her own guilt, and the novel becomes more than a postcolonial novel. Instead, Roy uses the kathakali performance, and this chapter, to model the survival of Indian culture and, most pointedly, the transcendence of boundaries and opening up of new worlds.

In many ways, the whole novel, like this small scene, is a performance of the mixing of languages and of bodies. As does performance, the novel takes on the roles of both interpretation and ritual and thereby gains a certain temporariness. The novel is not meant to be a stable, definable repository for meaning, allegory, or culture. Rather, it is constantly shifting, forcing the reader to search for “links and possible interpretations which are not explicitly named” (Durix 124). Throughout the novel, Roy toys with rules and boundaries, searching for a means to resist both her country’s colonizers and the misogynistic power structure of Indian society, in a way that goes beyond what is typical in postcolonial literature. In Chapter Twelve, Roy gathers her forces around her to concoct an alternative way of being.

In the course of her struggle, Roy contends with powerful limitations on her ability to make real her new, still developing worldview. First is that the novel is set in 1969 Kerala, which, as Robin Jeffrey explains, “was a place of boundaries and constraints – boundaries on where particular people might go; constraints on what they might do. People lived in discrete groups which connected with others in regulated, symbolic ways. (1992: 19)” (qtd. in Zarrilli 6). The culture of separation that pervades the setting for this novel provides strong opposition to Roy’s merges. Secondly, Roy dares to use a traditional dance form as the model for her modern novel’s resistance in a culture where “tradition is often cast in the normative role of maintaining and authorizing

a specific form of continuity with an ... 'authorized' past" (Zarrilli 11). It is the dominance of this "authorized past" that will stand so stubbornly in the way of Roy's attempts to rescue, and draw on, the non-official histories of her characters and her nation. Roy writes both to counter her native culture and to honor it.

Thus, Roy must find a way to incorporate many modes of being into her alternative world. She cannot only draw from postcolonial and postmodern resistant techniques such as rule breaking and culture blending. She must also find a way in contemporary India to honor the distinct traditions of her own ancient culture, which includes regimented, rule-bound ways of living within the powerful and respected presence of the past. It is through the highly regulated and classical movements of kathakali performance that Roy finds the means to take her resistance to a new (and distinctly Indian) level. As South Asian scholar A.K. Ramanujan has astutely observed, "In a culture like the Indian, the past does not pass. It keeps on providing paradigms and ironies for the present" (qtd. in Zarrilli 11). In her novel, Roy is able to draw upon both the paradigms, or models, provided her by Indian culture and also the ironies, or incongruities, of history that are ripe for adaptation and resistance.

Each of the sections in this essay will deal with the relative possibilities and limitations of constructs like language, body, and performance to achieve the "clouding" of worlds that would allow for the imagining of a new one. In this exploration we will arrive at methods of resistance that can, at first glance, appear in opposition to each other. For relief in this moment of dissonance we may look to a new movement in cultural studies in which theorists are pushed to "move beyond models of oppression, both the 'colonial model' of the oppressor and the oppressed, and the 'transgression model' of

oppression and resistance” as a way in which to consider the different possibilities for resistance that Roy offers to us (Thrift 150). “Both models of oppression are not only inappropriate to contemporary relations of power,” L. Grossberg argues, but,

They are also incapable of creating alliances; they cannot tell us how to interpolate various fractions of the population in different relations to power into the struggle for change.... My feeling is that an answer depends upon ... giving up notions of resistance that assume a subject standing entirely outside of and against a well-established structure of power... (qtd. in Thrift 150)

As we consider different embodied and bodied means of resistance throughout this essay, it is important that we consider, as Grossberg insists, subjects, bodies, and acts that seem antithetical to our traditional models of resistance. Nigel Thrift, in his essay “The Still Point” reminds us that,

The word ‘resistance’ ...all too quickly conjures up a history of a politics of ‘overturning, questioning, revaluing of everything which stretches all the way from the seventeenth-century world turned upside down to the twentieth-century world transfigured by senseless acts of beauty. On the other hand it can, equally precipitately, conjure up a history of myriad fugitive acts all making mock of the system with slides from notions of individual and group creativity to cultural production to political resistance....This kind of thinking about resistance with its implicit David versus Goliath romanticism has one very distinct disadvantage: everything has to be forced into the dichotomy of resistance or submission and all of the paradoxical effects which cannot be understood in this way remain hidden. (124)

Through language, body, and performance Roy finds ways to resist any dichotomy that posits a “right” way of being, whether in the form of a dominant language, a dominant culture, a dominant gender. Yet, we will find that even in her resistance she resists – choosing to include many paths to liberation rather than privileging one type of defiance over another. On one hand she utilizes techniques that are accepted by the Western world such as her subversion of Standard English and her

“modern” retellings of traditional tales, but because these strategies seem almost to gain legitimacy from the Western world’s recognition and acceptance of them, Roy is often dismissed by critics as being a postcolonial writer that is still entrapped/enslaved by the desires of the colonizer. Yet, Roy’s resistance does not only flow out of her postmodern/postcolonial play with language and body. Her path to transcendence is also based on a non-Western route – repetition in the form of the highly scripted kathakali performance. She uses two paths of resistance — subversion and repetition — which appear oppositional, but in Chapter Twelve, she achieves a harmony between them.

### **Great Stories**

Chapter Twelve focuses on the kathakali dancers’ performance of two classic stories from the Mahabharata, which Roy refers to as the “Great Stories.” She describes them as,

The ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don’t deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don’t surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover’s skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don’t. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won’t. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn’t. And yet you want to know again. (218)

With this paragraph Roy establishes The God of Small Things as a “Great Story” by connecting it, detail by detail, with the main elements of Great Stories. The novel’s circular storyline suggests the reader’s ability to “enter anywhere.” The narrative structure in which the “end” of the story, Sophie Mol’s funeral, is told first denies the possibility of a “trick ending.” Throughout the whole novel the reader bears a sense of foreboding because, without being explicitly told, she knows essentially what must

happen – that Velutha and Ammu will dare to be together, that their relationship and also Velutha is doomed, and that Estha and Rahel will be separated. There is no unforeseen. The reference to the stories being “as familiar as the house you live in” plays on the centrality of the two houses in the novel – the Ayemenem house the family lives in, and the History House. The familiarity of the “smell of your lover’s skin” draws on instances throughout the novel where the “Particular Paravan smell” of Velutha and the smell of river on his skin (317) are referred to. “Know[ing] how [the stories] end” suggests the novel’s structure, while “know[ing] that one day you will die, [yet] liv[ing] as though you won’t” is very much akin to Velutha and Ammu’s awareness of the danger inherent in their relationship. “. . .as though they knew already that for each tremor or pleasure they would pay with an equal measure of pain” (317). In The God of Small Things, the reader is explicitly aware of “who lives, who dies, who finds love, [and] who doesn’t,” as is the audience of a Great Story. Roy sets up these specific parallels between Great Stories and The God of Small Things to establish her novel as a modern Great Story.

In focusing this pivotal chapter on the telling of the Great Stories, Roy draws on both modern and historic ways of examining and reexamining our world. Roy’s tactic of repositioning the mythic tales of her culture is a familiar one in postcolonial literature. In contemporary novels such as Rushdie’s Shame or Walcott’s Omeros, recognizable storylines of the local culture or of an invading culture are often reinterpreted or appropriated to suggest the presence of unknown histories or perspectives. And indeed, Roy’s novel opens with the epigraph, “Never again shall one story be told as though it is the only one” (vi). The Great Stories become not only a powerful element of postcolonial literature, but also an important element of Roy’s novel. As we will examine later, many

of the novel's characters and conflicts can be mapped onto the original Great Stories of the Mahabharata. In this light, Roy's contextualizing of her novel as a Great Story falls in line with modern, recognized and thus practical resistant techniques.

However, when we consider Chapter Twelve as a lens for reading the entire novel, it becomes clear that Roy is also drawing on an historic use for the Great Stories as well. In Indian culture it is believed that the whole world – all actors, and actions – are merely a part of Lord Vishnu's master play. The world of both colonizer and colonized is subsumed within one overarching Great Story and these histories of colonization and oppression are merely reenactments of earlier, original models of power relations. In this way, Phillip Zarrilli writes, the stories give the audience “a sense of affirmation that human suffering is subsumed within the workings of Lord Vishnu's cosmic play” (2). Just as the cosmic play is a lens through which we may forever interpret the world, this chapter is a lens through which we may interpret this novel. The chapter demands of the reader not only an understanding of Roy's resistant moves through a Western lens in which subversion is privileged, but also forces the reader to gaze at the Western world through an Indian lens and see all of the colonizers' posturings of power as actions determined by the script of Vishnu's play. Here, Roy's contextualizing of her novel as a Great Story counters imposed Western definitions of resistance by recognizing repetition/reenactment as a powerful means of struggle equal to change/appropriation.

Many critics dismiss Roy's work by arguing that she does very little that is new in the field of postcolonial literature. Her subversion of dominance, whether in the form of culture, gender, or caste, is in some sense, familiar in its move to defamiliarize. Critics argue that they have seen her tactics before. However, it is my belief that Roy is fully

aware of her situation and is purposefully enlisting the aid of accepted subversive techniques in order to make her novel more popular and widely read. These are her “practical purposes in a hopelessly practical world,” a phrase that she positions alone on a page of its own at the start of her story (34). Roy’s critics’ readings of her text which account only for her use of recognized resistant moves are superficial in that they fail to understand the way in which Roy, through kathakali, explodes those definitions of resistance and transcends oppositional theories of resistance and oppression. In the following sections, “Language,” “Body,” and “Performance,” I will examine the powerful ways that Roy draws upon postcolonial/postmodern tropes to establish an atmosphere of resistance and to set the stage for her creation of an alternative way of imagining the world.

### **LANGUAGE**

“The sound of the chenda mushroomed over the temple, accentuating the silence of the encompassing night” (217). So begins Chapter Twelve of The God of Small Things. In this first line Roy takes a stand as an Indian writer writing in English, still uncomfortable herself with the language of her nation’s longtime oppressor, and insisting that there are some things that refuse translation. By using the Malayalam name, “chenda,” for the ceremonial drum used to accompany the dancers in a traditional kathakali performance, Roy creates a barrier to the English-only reader’s complete understanding of the scene. This barrier, Roy implies, goes deeper than language. There are elements of Indian culture that belong solely to the Indian people and cannot be taken, bought, or owned by the rest of the (colonizing) world. Roy, an Indian woman with an

urgent message for the First World about the heartbreaks/evils of globalization in the Third World, is in an impossible situation. How can she defend the value of the small things (for example her own local Malayalam language) if she must communicate in the language of Big (big money, big distribution power), English? Her answer comes in her resistance to the Standard English of the canon.

Roy's use of language as a means of struggle has many precedents. Language is seen as "a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse..." (Ashcroft 283).

Literary theorist Bill Ashcroft argues that

The control over language by the imperial centre – whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' ... or by planting the language of empire in a new place – remains *the most* potent instrument of cultural control. (283)

Roy begins her defiance of the economic and cultural hegemony of the imperial (First) World here. She is said to have "transformed [the English language] and used it against the colonizer" through the "exotic" and eclectic writing style she employs (Pietilainen 104). Her writing is eclectic and exotic in the way it collects different languages and the way her highly individual wording and narrative structure strikes the Western reader as different and almost wild. The novel's diverse, "nonsensical" and inventive language is an integral part of Roy's activism – a deconstruction and destabilization of orthodox English. Full of Malayalam words, made-up and misheard/misremembered English words, and distinctly unique imagery and metaphor, The God of Small Things seems to thumb its nose at the English language and consequently English colonial power. Her attack on orthodox English reverberates throughout the world, cracking the concrete, hierarchical power structure that places First World above Third, and big above small.

One of Roy's destabilizing techniques, the use of untranslated words, is not an uncommon device in postcolonial literature. Roy's liberal use of Malayalam words serves to alienate the non-native reader and include the native reader. Establishing a distance between the narrative and the non-native reader serves to remind the reader of her cultural limitations, for once refuting the notion that members of the First World have unmitigated access to the globalized world. For the non-Indian, non-Keralan reader, C. Gopinatha Pillai argues, "[Roy] defamiliarizes the language..." (Dodiya 91). Her use of untranslated words, he continues, "insert[s] a truth of culture into the text. Malayalam words embedded in the English text seem to carry the oppressed culture...(Dodiya 91). Thus, not only is the non-native reader confronted by her position as an outsider in her inability to fully understand each word of the text, but she is also forbidden to forget the culture that, though once stifled by English culture, remains alive and vibrant, though perhaps below Western radar. For native readers, the untranslated words in The God of Small Things "form part of a series of childhood evocations [by the author] ... the private echoes of a language of the heart which may appeal even more to native speakers of Malayalam" (Durix 15). For native Keralan readers, to read The God of Small Things is to access a shared cultural past.

Yet, for many critics, and indeed for Roy herself, simply including a liberal number of Malayalam words into the text is not enough. The attempt must be made to "concoct[] an English that is Indian" (Rajan 84). Beyond her use of untranslated words, Roy also plays with the rules of language in a number of ways.

The God of Small Things abounds in capitalized and portmanteau words which draw the readers' attention to the ideological value of the expressions thus highlighted," and further "the rift between signifier and signified. (Durix 16)

Through capitalization Roy draws attention to phrases and expressions that carry with them an official, and even oppressive, weight. These phrases, which include, “Jolly Well Behave” (141, 308), “History House” (119), “Regional Flavor” (46, 219), “Love Laws” (33), “Men’s Needs” (161), among many others, are written as they are heard, loaded with acquired meaning and authority. At other times, Rahel and Estha read and speak backwards to each other, “ehT serutnevA fo eisuS lerriuuqS. / enO gnirps gninrom eisuS lerriuuqS ekow pu,” the English they speak appearing jumbled on the page as a foreign language and causing the children’s English school-teacher to insist that they have “Satan in their eyes” (58).

There is also the made-up/pieced-together language of The God of Small Things – a perverted English that reflects its foreign-ness on the tongues of the people forced to learn it, first as colonial subjects, then later, as hopeful members of a global economy. Roy attempts to undermine the English of her country’s colonizers by “chop[ping] English up and start[ing] over, afresh, without the stains and staleness of colonial English marking her language” (Chien 157). Words and adjectives are strung together in new and unexpected ways such as in Estha’s “green-wavy, thick-watery, lumpy, seaweedy, floaty, bottomless-bottomful feeling” (102), the “Furrywhirring and a Sariflapping” of the bat in Baby Kochamma’s sari (8), or the “rushing, rolling fishswimming sense” of the Ayemenem House (30). In other ways, the myriad grammatical rules that bind the English language are toyed with as in phrases like, “Margaret Kochamma told her to Stoppit. So she Stoppited” (135) or “the tall iron railing that separated the Meeters from the Met, and Greeters from the Gret” (135). Still other expressions undermine Standard English in the way that they are written as heard, such as “Lay. Ter.” (139), and “Bar

Nowl” (184). In these examples, Roy’s writing takes part in what Loreto Todd describes as a process of “relexification of one’s mother tongue, using English vocabulary but indigenous structures and rhythms” and in this process, forming “new Englishes [which are] no longer regarded in terms of imperfection but rather in terms of creation, [the] staging [of] a language which is both like and unlike English” (Durix 87-8).

Rather than simply “concocting” an Indianized English, the language that begins to emerge in Roy’s text is closer to a new language than its colonial original.

In rearranging the English language, Roy gives us a sense of English in formation (a postcolonial country in formation)...Gradually, she creates a new language by training us to understand how she is using it. Thus, while certain words and phrases will make no sense at the beginning her book, they accrete meaning toward the end...her fiction wrings patterns out of letters with a relentlessness that conveys the urgency of her project: to change the way we read and see English, and what it stands for. (Chien 182)

In teaching this new language, Roy and her Indian characters begin to take English as their own (in a way that oddly mirrors and mocks the Western world’s pop appropriation of Hindu deities). Roy is not simply parroting English back at us but is changing it. It is these changes that gather the most meaning, for we can no longer presuppose the stability of meaning or the existence of neat identity markers.

Roy’s ...broken, fragmented English represents, causes, or sets into motion the conception of a broken world. We realize that the ability to conceive of unbroken worlds, of space as meaningful, is possible only if language seems unbroken – if language can still serve as sign and referent. (Chien 163)

Once broken up, language’s ability to represent its subject and its speaker falters. In the spaces between sign and referent, we glimpse the possibility of freedom.

As Roy’s language slips away from orthodox English, the “unbroken worlds” of today - dichotomized into First and Third - become less viable. A new world begins to

take shape “nonaligned with conventional rationality and identity thinking,” that moves beyond a cultural site in which colonizer and colonized meet and retain their predetermined roles (Bahri 9).

However, despite Roy’s expert manipulation of language to create the space for a political and social reality not yet realized, she is still trapped by

the dilemma of the postcolonial exile...who is... unable to accept all the rules (especially colonialist rules) that seemed at one time in history – in the early twentieth century – to be embedded in... language,” and yet, “is fated to barter and converse in this language, to *be* in this language. (Chien 162)

Roy must use English if she wishes to make her message public and she must make her message public if she wishes to impact the systems that oppress her.

As an Indian writer, Roy’s choice to write in English is often seen as a decision to communicate with people other than in India and especially in prosperous, colonizing Western nations. However, for political reasons, Roy must also use English to communicate with compatriots across the nation of India. The most widely used language across India is Hindi and its different varieties (for example Hindustani and Urdu). Yet each dialect has traditionally been associated with various factions: Hindi with the Hindus; Urdu with the Muslims; and Hindustani with Partition-era politicians seeking to unite Indians under a national language. These politicians were often unpopular with religious groups as well as with local people strongly committed to their regional language. English, on the other hand, “is not associated with any religious or ethnic group,” which gives it a certain neutrality “in a linguistic context where native languages, dialects, and styles sometimes have acquired undesirable connotations” (Kachru 292). Thus, Roy is forced to “be” in the language of her country’s longtime

oppressors not only to accommodate the Western world, but also to communicate with her own people.

Yet the overwhelming popularity and financial success of South Asian authors in Western nations in the 1990s which has led to the active recruitment and marketing of authors who can present an “authentic” novel of best-seller capacity, suggests another reason for Roy’s choice to write in English. South Asian authors increasingly find themselves being offered magnanimous cash-advances for their novels and witness the spread of their work to a world market that only global powers like the United States and Britain can control. The God of Small Things, which won the Booker Prize in 1997, was one of these books, and was sold by HarperCollins worldwide. The novel was translated into twenty-seven languages, including Japanese, Korean, German, and Norwegian, and is available in more than thirty countries. Even before the Booker Prize was announced over 350,000 copies had been sold outside of India. The novel is, in fact, more popular with Western audiences than Indian - sales in India have been well outpaced by international sales and the novel has been on bestseller lists in hardback and paperback for years in the United States (Durix 44).

The wealth of international praise and profits bestowed on Roy for her novel served in many ways to perpetuate the colonizer/colonized relationship. Western critics’ approval of The God of Small Things suggests that the novel’s value is defined by its fulfillment of Western desires. In India, critics challenged Roy’s global success and argued that the novel failed to move beyond the exoticization – Othering and savaging - of India. Indian critic Sukumar Azhikode blasted the novel in his review, saying, “The book is full of sights, especially for the Westerners. But it offers no insights. It is very

satisfying. And that is the main flaw. It offers no challenge to the reader. It is Kerala for the foreign tourist..." (Dodiya 131). Critic Petri Pietilainen agreed, arguing, "we learn nothing [about India] in addition to our pre-expectations," from Roy's novel, suggesting that Roy not only wrote in the language of Western civilization, but also wrote *for* a Western audience, doing little to loosen the stranglehold of Western influence on her country and, in fact, profiting from it (104). Another critic, Marta Dvorak agreed, explaining

With its domesticated mythological sensibility, its topographical details, its interpolation of Malayalam words, and descriptions of every sphere of social life, from the domestic sphere of dress and cooking to the cultural sphere of kathakali, the novel...satisfies the Western reader's taste for the exotic... (Durix 50)

Dvorak went on to add that; "the combination of explicit female sexuality with transgressions of caste and class is an effective ingredient of Western marketability" (55).

Roy is trapped between her need to use English and the way her use makes her complicit with Western powers. Dvorak casts Roy's inability to escape this trap as an hypocrisy in The God of Small Things, highlighting the fact that

Roy commodif[ies] Indian culture to feed the English-speaking Western world's appetite for 'marginal' literatures and cultures, all the while ostensibly criticizing the role that American economic and cultural hegemony plays in the erosion of the aforesaid traditional Indian culture. (Durix 43)

However, it is my argument that Roy recognizes and addresses her own hypocrisy in the figure of the troubled storyteller, the Kathakali Man.

As a writer and novelist, Roy tells stories. Her role as storyteller resonates with that of the kathakali dancer, his body, "from the age of three...planed and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of story telling" (219). Like a writer who uses pen,

ink, and words to tell her stories, the dancer tells his stories with a different sort of instrument, his body and his gestures. In Chapter Twelve, Roy attempts to open up a space in which to address her choice to write in English. Through her descriptions of the dancers who dance to “jettison their humiliation in the Heart of Darkness [the resort]...” (218), she is able to put into words her feelings of guilt that she may have betrayed her culture.

In the chapter, Roy describes the kathakali dancer’s struggle as “the reverse of an actor’s struggle – he strives not to *enter* a part but to escape it” (220). With this book, Roy herself also strives, not to *enter* the genre or canon of English literature, postcolonial literature, Indian literature in English, but to escape it. “For practical purposes,” (34) however, Roy must use English and include in her novel postcolonial elements that are familiar to Western audiences in order to increase her chances that her novel will be read and valued. In this way, she is as practical as her dancer who, “turn[s] to tourism to stave off starvation” (218). Through her manipulation of the English language, however, Roy begins to create an atmosphere of resistance that permeates the entire novel, forcing her reader to be acutely aware of the power structures acting on the text and on her reading of it.

### **BODY**

From its beginning, the overt and insistent physicality in The God of Small Things draws the reader’s attention to the body as a possible site of resistance. Thrift describes the body as, “our general medium for having a world” (127), while dance critic Ann Daly defines the body as “a complex, contradictory, and every changing cultural site

of “discursive intercourse” (qtd. in Reed 505). These definitions position the body as a generative and progressive means of creating a new world, a goal that Roy has already attempted in her experimentation with language. In this chapter, then, the body becomes, like language, another means through which Roy can explore the possibility of an alternative way of surviving, existing, and being.

In the novel, Roy’s characters use their bodies to defy, through sex, the Love Laws, which govern human relationships in India (and the world). Written, Roy explains, “thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar...before Vasco da Gama arrived...long before Christianity arrived in a boat,” the Love Laws, “lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33). An ancient scholar named Manu wrote the *Manavadharmashastra*, also known as the Laws of Manu or the Love Laws. In his text, Manu outlined highly specific rules for marital (and extra-marital) relationships: a man does not lose his status by marrying a woman of lower caste but a woman will lose her status in the same case, a woman can marry a man of her own choice but, in that case, she loses the right to her dowry, and Untouchables are forbidden, in all cases, from mixing with higher castes (Balvannanadhan 105). Ammu and Velutha’s relationship is forbidden along caste lines, while other, unspoken laws also forbid Estha and Rahel’s incestuous act. Through these relationships, Roy continues her pattern of resistance – the physical breaking of the Love Laws mirrors Roy’s flouting of the laws of grammar and conventional narrative structure.

Bodies also resist the colonial/imperial influence by clouding boundaries. The physical signs of cultural difference that should supposedly keep people apart – for Velutha and Ammu these signs are contained in each one’s skin color and smell – do not

do so. “They stood there. Skin to skin. Her brownness against his blackness...She smelled the river on him. His Particular Paravan smell...She pulled his head down toward her and kissed his mouth. A *cloudy* kiss” (316-7, emphasis mine). Inherent in their defiance of the Love Laws is a breaking down of those barriers established by cultural difference. The kathakali dancers blur boundaries through their complete immersion into the parts they perform. Both men are transformed into gods through their performance and Roy no longer refers to them as “the dancers” or even the “Kathakali Men.” They are simply Karna, Kunti, Dushasana, and Bhima. “Tonight...He *is* Karna” (220). The dancer who plays Kunti, a female god, is physically transformed as well, described as having “grown soft and womanly, a man with breasts, from doing female parts for years” (221). In these situations, the clouding of boundaries between physical bodies suggests a resistance to other constructed divisions including those that place big above small, signifier above referent, and First World above Third.

But, the kathakali dancer, despite his transformation into a female, both within the kathakali performance and physically through the changes in his body, does not last as a resistant body. Once the performance ends and the Kathakali Men remove their makeup they return home “to beat their wives. Even Kunti, the soft one with breasts” (224). The moment in which the breakdown of barriers - between Touchable and Untouchable, man and woman, god and man – ends and, with the dawn, the world returns to the ordered, predictable regimen of Ayemenem. “Outside and around, the little town ... stirred and came to life...Kochu Thomban woke and delicately cracked open his morning coconut...An old man woke and staggered to the stove to warm his peppered coconut oil” (224). This morning is no different than any other - the dancers have interrupted nothing.

The moment in which barriers are transcended ends for other characters as well, most tragically for Velutha who is brutally punished for his defiance of the Love Laws. Velutha is too fragile to withstand the policemen's beating. He is betrayed by his body's weakness, and he succumbs to the policemen's power. The fragility of Velutha's body is descriptively highlighted by the contrasts between his body and what he is beaten and broken with. "The thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth...The muted crunch of skull on cement...goosebumps where the handcuffs touched his skin" (292, 294). Unjustly murdered by policemen, Velutha's death is an episode of the oppressive Touchable violence against an Untouchable (all Untouchables) that preserves the social order of Ayemenem.

The bodies of both the Kathakali Man and Roy are appropriated by Western culture, emphasizing their failure to transcend barriers of First and Third Worlds. The Kathakali Men become "Regional Flavor", forced to "collapse and amputate" their stories to fit the small attention spans of the tourists, who barely watch the dancers as they perform shadows of Indian culture (219, 121). The kathakali dancers feel that they are traitors – to themselves, their sacred craft, and their culture. They are forced by the state of their world in "these days", to provide for themselves and their families. Roy writes of one dancer's despair upon "hawk(ing) the only thing he owns. The stories that his body can tell" (219). "These days" refers to the modern state of globalization, international trade, cross-cultural communication and appropriation, when the power structures set in place centuries ago have come to define a new, perhaps more disguised notion of colonial oppression and imperialism.

“These days,” The God of Small Things is a huge success worldwide and has won the Booker Prize, leaving Roy widely popular and inundated by requests for interviews. In many interviews, physical descriptions of Roy feature prominently in the introduction. She is “beautiful, radiant, and sharp tongued,” with “a tiny impish figure” (Pietilainen 103). “The rarest sort of commodity in publishing, being possessed of an amazing elfin beauty as well as great talent” (Pietilainen 110). Many reviews also mention her nose stud as well as her dark skin, and dark eyes. Roy, who looked to escape definition and forced representation in language, finds in her use of the body, the same type of objectification.

As Roy does with her writing, the kathakali dancer places his body on the market. His body becomes a commodity for the consumption of Euro/American tourists and thus a lasting site of colonial oppression. Both the Kathakali Men and Roy are (re)produced for Western consumption as sole bearers of Indian history and culture. Their culture is thus diminutized by the idea that Indian history and culture can be reduced enough to be embodied by one figure (or a six-hour swimming pool performance). Like the kathakali dancer in her novel, Roy is living through “these days” as well, and has been drawn into the global market; her physical self becoming almost as well-known/handled/discussed as her book. Here again, Roy seems to have found that, despite the successes of her resistant techniques grounded in language and the body, she is also limited by the way that these techniques have become so much a part of Western culture and understanding of Third World countries/citizens. She must find a means of resistance that has yet to be compromised – even if it is not practical.

## PERFORMANCE

In Chapter Twelve, Roy takes a break from her collecting, concocting, and clouding to tell a relatively simple story about a kathakali performance being danced late at night in a nearly abandoned temple. Through this dance, Roy will move her resistance back to India, recognizing that as she does so she will potentially lose a large portion of her audience. However, in affirming the value of her Indian audience and her own Indian heritage, Roy unearths a means of resistance, embodied by kathakali classical dance that has yet to be appropriated.

As Roy turns on her Western oppressors and examines the importance of her Western audience, her novel begins to mirror the way in which dance “offers a site of potential resistance to hegemonic discourses through its representation of the body on stage as a moving subject that actually looks back at the spectator, eluding the kind of appropriation that the ‘male gaze’ theories...outline” (Gilbert 345). As she “looks back” at her critics, Roy is able to see that perhaps the only thing that cannot be appropriated about her and her writing is that which is invisible to the Western eye. For this purpose, she writes a chapter about kathakali dance-drama, the stories, techniques, and “complete” appreciation of which is denied to foreign-born audiences.

Through this dance, Roy will find the means to access a means of resistance entirely different than the typical forms of subversion tapped by her use of language and body. As Thrift argues, “In part, to state that dance can be used to subvert power or to combat it is to sorely miss the point. [Dance] eludes power, rather than confronts it ...” (149-150). Roy is no longer conversing in the postcolonial language of resistance defined by her colonizer. She is working, instead, completely outside of the Western

world's realm of knowledge and control. This elusion of power, or repositioning of "dominant social institutions," Thrift writes, utilizes dance as "a kind of exaggeration of everyday embodied joint action which contains within it the capacity to hint at different experiential frames, 'elsewheres' which are here" (Thrift 150). The Great Stories and the kathakali performance refigure the everyday lives of the dancers, the novel's other characters, and Roy herself as "embodied joint actions" which carry in them the power to create alternative worlds. "Dance is about using the body," writes Thrift,

To conjure up 'virtual', 'as-if' worlds...dance can...be considered as the fabrication of a 'different world' of meaning, made with the body. It is perhaps the most direct way in which the body-subject sketches out an [as-if] sphere... The dance is...aimed at... evolving a semblance of a world within which specific questions take their meaning'...The 'point' of dance, and of other forms of presentational communication, lies in their being able to 'articulate complexes of thought-with-feeling that words cannot name, let alone set forth. It is a way of accessing the world, not just a means of achieving ends that cannot be named' (Radley). (147)

Indeed, the kathakali dancers' performance expresses their rage, their pain, and their despair – their "complexes of thought-with-feeling" – that they cannot articulate in the rest of their lives. In the same way, Chapter Twelve becomes a space in which Roy may revisit her own rage, pain, and despair and try to throw off the oppressive weight of her country's colonizers on her writing. Roy's attempt will only succeed if she finds the means to reground her resistance in Indian culture. If she does succeed, however, a new world will be made possible.

### **The Great Stories (revisited)**

The two Great Stories from the Mahabharata that the dancers perform in Chapter Twelve are *Karna Shabadam* - Kunti's unveiling of herself to Karna as his mother, and

*Duryodhana Vadham* - the murder of Dushasana by Bhima. These and many other stories from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are typically learned, recited, retold, and referred to from birth in south Indian society. Most young children, including Estha and Rahel (despite their Syrian Christian upbringing) are taken to kathakali performances at a very young age and taught “the language and gestures of kathakali” and the stories told in performance (225). In this chapter, Roy gives her readers a loose summary of the stories the Kathakali Men perform, but a deeper understanding of the metaphorical value of the stories to the novel depends on a prior knowledge of the events and interrelations of each tale.

For the kathakali dancer, his performance of ancient characters allows him to transcend the unviability of his life. “These days he has become unviable. Unfeasible. Condemned goods” (219). The story, “the vessel into which he pours himself...contains him” in a way that is both limiting and liberating. Although he cannot escape the roles that define him, he is able to become godlike in the space of his performance of them, thus transcending the oppression he lives in his mortal life. “In his abject defeat lies his supreme triumph. He is Karna...” (220). As the dancer achieves this freedom, Roy establishes this performance as a means of resistance and transcendence that finally is untouched by Western hands. In turning away (in defeat) from her use of language and her use of the body because of the limitations on each, Roy arrives at her triumph – a space in which she can incorporate both Western David-and-Goliath, subversion-or-oppression models of resistance, with a distinctly Eastern model of resistance embodied by the kathakali performance. The use of these stories is more than a postmodern/postcolonial trick.

*Karna Shabadam*, the story of Kunti and Karna, tells of how Kunti had sex with the Sun God, Surya, out of wedlock. “She...gave herself to him [Surya]. Nine months later she bore him a son...named Karna” (221). In fear of social stigma – “she was unmarried and couldn’t keep him” (221) – Kunti placed Karna, who was born “sheathed in light” (221) and wearing golden armor that made him invincible, in a basket and sent him down the river. Karna was found by Adhirotra, a charioteer, and raised as a member of the lower caste despite his godly paternity. When Karna grew up he became a great warrior and eventually a king. However, through a complex web of deception and manipulated loyalties, Karna was eventually tricked out of his armor (as a result of his kind and giving nature he gives it away) and killed by his brother at a young age, not long after Kunti finally revealed his true origins to him. Karna is described as the “most sympathetic figure in the Mahabharata” (“Karna.”).

The story of Bhima and Dushasana, *Duryodhana Vadham*, relates how Bhima and his four brothers, the Pandavas, staked their communal wife, Draupadi, in a game of dice against Dushasana and his brothers, the Kauravas. After winning the game and therefore Draupadi, Dushasana tried to disrobe her. Draupadi is said to only have maintained her sari, and her honor, through the magical intervention of Lord Krishna. However, Bhima was so enraged by Dushasana’s insult to his wife that he “vowed to avenge her honor”. Draupadi, upon hearing Bhima’s oath, then swore that she would not tie up her hair until it had been washed in Dushasana’s blood. Eventually, “Bhima cornered Dushasana in a battlefield already strewn with corpses”. There he “clubbed Dushasana to the floor. He pursued every feeble tremor in the dying body with his mace, hammering at it until it was stilled”. “Then, with his bare hands, he tore the body open...and stooped to lap blood

straight from the bowl of the torn carcass...When he had drunk enough, he stood up...and went to find Draupadi and bathe her hair in fresh blood”. (223-4)

Yet, in Roy’s novel, it is not only the dancers who perform the roles of the gods in these ancient stories, many of Roy’s characters, as well, can be mapped onto the classic roles. Velutha, like Karna of the Mahabharata, is the most sympathetic figure in the novel, who, although he is of a low caste is related to the gods. Velutha’s youth and virility contributes to the image of him as invincible until, because of his goodness, he is killed, though in this performance of *Karna Vadham*, his murderers both are and are not his brother(s). “If they [the policemen] hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago” (293). In this performance, Ammu becomes Kunti, who had sexual relations with a god – in Ammu’s case “the God of Small Things,” Velutha – and who cast away her son, Estha, out of shame. Estha then, as Ammu/Kunti’s true son, must also be Karna, the son sent away from his mother because of a social stigma. Here, Ammu as Kunti becomes strangely the mother of both Velutha and of Estha. “At the moment that she guided him [Velutha] into her, she caught a passing glimpse of his youth...and she smiled down at him as though he was her child” (318). Thus almost immediately upon attempting to draw strict parallels between characters in the Great Stories and characters in The God of Small Things they become complicated. How can both Velutha and Estha be Karna? What other parallels don’t line up?

We must also read Velutha as Dushasana who is brutally punished for disrobing another man’s wife, as Velutha is brutally punished for his sexual relationship with

Ammu, a woman of another caste and a divorcee. In this story Ammu becomes Draupadi who is disrobed and humiliated. Yet in the story from the Mahabharata, Draupadi is, as Roy describes her, “strangely angry only with the men that won her, not the ones that staked her,” while Ammu’s anger is not at all directed at the man that won her, Velutha, but rather at the society/family that staked her and humiliated her (223). “Ammu was incoherent with rage and disbelief at what was happening to her” (239). Whether by subverting the traditional role or by embodying multiple mythical/traditional roles, the characters in The God of Small Things change the roles they perform and, in doing so, change the course of history.

Throughout the novel Roy has shown that it won’t work for India and Indians to simply perform “Western”. There is a consistent disdain shown towards Chacko’s anglophile habits, his “Reading Out Loud Voice,” and his “Oxford Moods” (53). Pappachi who fawned over English visitors is also criticized. “Ammu said that Pappachi was an incurable British CCP, which was short for chhi-chhi poach and in Hindi meant shit-wiper. Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was Anglophile” (50). However, by misaligning Ammu’s parallel with Draupadi, Roy also suggests that it is also not enough for India and Indians to simply resist Western culture by loyally performing “Indian”. Her novel “places its heroine’s story in the context of traditional Hindu narratives...[and] shows how such traditional narratives close off possibilities for women...” (Mee 334). In a novel written to open up possibilities rather than to close them off, Roy’s characters must gain strength from the traditional narratives and yet also function outside of their confines. Roy’s resistance to both playing Western and playing Indian also speaks to the conflicted position of her novel, which on one hand was accused

of being too much written as a Western commodity, while at the same time was criticized for not being Indian enough to “teach readers anything new” (Pietilainen 104).

I believe that Roy finds a space for liberation and resistance in the small changes in her characters’ lived performances of Indian history. After coming up against the limitations of both language and body, Roy turns to the dance and performance in Chapter Twelve as her last hope for a future of survival. And indeed, her faith in the power of the performance is what allows her to write this book, for as she and the Kathakali Man are intrinsically connected, her novel and the lived and acted performance of Indian history are also intertwined. It is in this chapter that Roy is able to reconfigure her paradoxical move of “lamenting the end of the story and the mortgaging of the storyteller to the market” while, at the same time she herself is “retelling anew a story supposedly as old as time” (Bahri 30-1).

In the first section of the Mahabharata it is written, “What is found here may be found elsewhere. What is not found here will not be found elsewhere” (“Mahabharata.”). Thus, the Mahabharata encompasses all that there is in the world, from human emotions to concrete events. In this way, the characters in The God of Small Things are the characters in the Great Stories. However, instead of performing these roles that remain the same each time, they live them, and in being lived, the stories are finally changed. No longer are these stories with endings we already know - characters, roles, responses, and chains of events have been disrupted - anything can happen.

The Great Stories told in the Mahabharata are a powerful force throughout Indian history in part because of their relevance to human lives. As Wendy O’Flaherty writes, “Myths are not written by gods and demons, nor for them; they are by, for and about

men. Gods and demons serve as metaphors for human situations...” (qtd. in Zarrilli 4). In recognizing this very palpable human presence in the stories we must also recognize the messiness of life signified, in some way, by humanity. The changes that the characters in the novel make to the characters in the Great Stories that their lives are drawn from are, in a large part, a reflection of each character’s humanity. Unlike those characters, however, the policemen - who can be paralleled with Bhima for their brutal murder of Velutha – fail to exhibit any recognition of their common humanity. Instead of clouding their roles in the Great Stories they have withdrawn more deeply into them, further establishing all of the many boundaries – between men, between castes, between genders, between ages, between Worlds – that divide us. The performance of Bhima’s murder of Dushasana eventually descends into madness – “there was madness there that morning...frenzy...brutal extravagance,” in this story that had “set out with the semblance of structure and order, then bolted like a frightened horse into anarchy” (224). This madness is, in a sense, normal, since hopefully one would have to be mad to kill a fellow man. On the other hand, the policemen’s murder of Velutha is done with “economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy” (293). Instead of being human, the policemen have no feeling that there is “any kinship, any connection between themselves and him [Velutha]” (293). Thus, the policemen’s performance of Bhima is a step closer to a distilled version of the story in which only the violence exists. In a way, with the humanity removed from story, the policemen’s roles become clearer as history progresses rather than cloudier as do the roles of the other characters. This clarity of roles establishes clear boundaries and, in failing to complicate, fails to resist.

Were this novel to simply reenact all of the cultural/social/traditional mores of postcolonial novels that went before it, it would not succeed as an act of resistance. The Kathakali Man does not change the roles he plays, only re-performs them and thus only achieves transcendence within his nightlong performance. If this novel did not mess with the “roles” of storytelling, of language, and of body, in postcolonial novels, the possibility for transcendence and resistance could only exist within the limited space and time of reading it. And certainly in the (sheltered) reading of The God of Small Things, the shared postcolonial techniques of resistance such as inventive language, incorporating untranslated words, and time-shift serve to excite the reader while actually experiencing the book, but simply become burdens once finished reading it. The devices Roy used are loaded with both Western commodification and “real” Indian representation and when the book is closed we are once again concerned with these questions of authenticity.

Yet in the novel’s epigraph “for practical purposes in a hopelessly practical world,” Roy seems to take up these burdens, acknowledges them and chooses to move forward anyway (34).

The novel seems to accept the conditions of its production and their impact on its formal lineament. In the double gesture of seeming to concede the end of storytelling in its richness, and in straining against the impulse to abbreviation and cameo essence, however, the novel reveals the conditions of its productive origins without capitulation to them completely. (Bahri 206)

In many ways, the characters in the novel seem to do the same when they subvert the “conditions of their production” or the roles they were born to play through their lived lives. The connections of the characters to a story that “was and wasn’t theirs” (224) reveals these conditions, while the changes in their performance of that story are their means of resisting complete “capitulation”.

The reliving of the ancient stories of the Mahabharata by modern characters has the potential to powerfully situate the “small” lives of the novel’s characters within an ancient and meaningful tradition. As they watch the Kathakali Men dance, Estha and Rahel are described as “separated...but joined by a story” (222). Here the potential for the Mahabharata and these Great Stories, cornerstones of Indian culture, to connect and empower Indians is suggested. However, Estha and Rahel are also described as being “separated...Trapped in the bog of a story that was and wasn’t theirs” (224). Instead of empowering them, in this instance the story that, in one sense is a part of them, also constrains them.

The power of the performance in this novel (and in this world) comes in the gaps in the narrative or in moments where things no longer match up/align in the way that they’re supposed to. Roy’s successes in using language as a form of resistance come in the form of her broken language and the broken worlds it creates. Roy’s most effective language based resistance is to make uncertain the connections between words and their (official) meanings. Roy and her characters’ successes in using the body as a form of resistance come in the physical blurring of boundaries of caste and gender through sex and through the staging of these stories. This performance – the central focus of this chapter that steps outside of the continuing narrative of the novel – echoes and adds to those successes and, in doing so, seems to hold the key to the elusive, free future of India and its people.

D’Souza emphasizes,

The blanks and broken traces in the text...permit slippages in the fabric of the narration, introducing a...subversive, sense that emphasizes the signifier above the signified content, and opens up multiple permutations

of meaning, forcing the reader to search for links and possible interpretations that are not expressed explicitly. (124)

Once again, Roy has succeeded in modeling a broken world, the gaps in which can be seen as spaces for new “possible interpretations” and alternative ways of being. The book then, succeeds in the moments when it does not simply reenact the Great Stories or other postcolonial texts. It cannot be the Kathakali Man simply replaying the ancient roles. Rather it must be modeled on the performances of the Great Stories by the characters in the novel – performances that alter and subvert those common stories even as they spring out of them. This subversion occurs most notably in the love scene between Ammu and Velutha that the novel closes with. Not only does this intimate and powerful connection between the two radically alter the original tales of both Kunti and Karna and Draupadi and Dushasana, but also in its placement and conclusion it subverts the power of those tales over the lives of modern Indians. The last word of the novel is “Tomorrow,” implying a hope for a future that is unknown (321). It is in this moment of not knowing that The God of Small Things rewrites the Great Stories, positing an alternative space for existence that is based quite strongly in Indian history.

### **Kathakali Dance-Drama**

There is much that cannot be imagined by/is invisible to non-Indian (even non-South Indian) audiences about the performance of the Kathakali Men in The God of Small Things. By modeling her novel after a kathakali performance, Roy reserves an element of her text for her Indian audience alone.

The God of Small Things mirrors a kathakali performance in the way that it has

The capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the political to the psychological; from the examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets...It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relation between the two. (Vishnu 158)

Similarly,

The Hindu art of dancing unfolds and enacts the manifestation of the divine powers of the universe. It reflects the gestures and the actions of all beings, from the gods high above to the animals and flowers below, from the circling of the stars to the melodies of the winds and the murmur of the waters. (Meri xiv)

Roy's novel and this ancient Indian art both attend to the breadth of the universe, from the smallest gesture to the movement of the world, and attempt to demonstrate the meaningful connection between all things, all actions, and all times.

The physical enactment of these stories, both sweeping and minute, is done through a combination of *hastabhinaya* (hand pantomime) and *mukhaja* (facial pantomime), a complex gesture language that dancers begin studying when they are as young as three years old. "While the movement of the hand traces out an idea, the appropriate emotion is expressed through the face and eyes, and thus an entire story is told" (Meri 12). The dancers remain silent through the entire performance, which can last through the night until dawn, the dialogue given instead in the form of songs and drumbeats produced by two musicians near the back of the stage. Each character in the story performed is easily identifiable to a Malayali audience since each role has its own distinctive make-up, elaborate costume, and characteristic movements. Along with the intricate and complex language of hand gestures, the dancers perform highly choreographed patterns of stage movement to literally 'speak' their character's dialogue with their hands, and use their face and eyes to express the internal emotions (*bhava*) of

each character (Zarrilli 4). The dancers' costumes are as elaborate as their gestures and include brilliantly colored wide skirts, many silver and gold ornaments, a waist-length wig and crown, and a striking mask.

Both kathakali and Roy's novel resist appropriation through language. Kathakali, spoken only in elaborate hand gestures, facial expressions, and choreographed movements, all articulate and precise, often proves strange and impenetrable to non-native viewers. In this way, the gesture language of the kathakali dancers – in its complete foreign-ness to Western audiences and ready familiarity to Indian spectators – plays the role of the Malayalam words in Roy's text. However, although untranslated the gestures (mudras) would serve to reinforce for the non-native reader her position as outsider, this element of resistance is lost in the translation of the visual language to the written (English) word. Roy does attempt to maintain the performed aspect of the speech by describing the scene rather than telling the story being presented – “Karna shuddered in delight...The ecstasy of that kiss. He dispatched it to the ends of his body” (221). Some parts, though, must be translated into words – “‘Where were you,’ he asked her, ‘when I needed you most?’” (221). In print form, the unspoken, visual nature of Karna's question is lost. Even so, the emergence of this gesture language in the text presents a fascinating combination of the resistant sites of both body and language that Roy has also explored within The God of Small Things. The union of the two suggests possibility and an opportunity for the creation of an “unfettered” language.

Although still powerful as means of resistance, Roy's uses of language and body and now even the storytelling gesture language of kathakali performance have shown their limitations. All that is left invisible (and thus possible) is the intricate system of

rules that regulate and construct the performance, an unseen scaffold for the transcendent appreciation, *rasa*, of any classical Indian art form. The intricacy of the gestures of kathakali presents an interesting foil to Roy's previously established affinity for rule breaking. Indeed, the performance of kathakali requires the perfect execution of the movements of the dance.

Nothing is left to chance or individual variation...perfection is based on conformation and rigid adherence to ancient rules...the dancer suppresses his personality to become the vehicle of the theme...every part of the body, as well as the facial expression, moves according to rigid laws...  
(Meri xiv, 5)

These rigid laws are seen in every form of classical dance including the ancient dance of Vishnu that created the world. La Meri highlights the importance of these rule-bound dances in the history of the world, explaining

Vishnu...the ideal dancer and actor... is the highest god himself, the source and motor force of universal life. In his creative or destructive aspect he is called Vishnu, or Siva, both aspects counterbalancing each other and being fundamentally manifestations of the self-same essence. As Vishnu, this cosmic master dancer is viewed as having created, through a ceremonious dance of three solemn strides, earth, space, and the vault of the firmament...Through dancing Siva creates the universe, through dancing he dissolves it again. (Meri xvii)

The perfection of Vishnu/Siva's performance is implied by the description of him as a "master dancer" performing a "ceremonious" or ritual dance. The generative (and destructive) element of the dance harnessed by Vishnu/Siva is thought to be passed on to humans through the perfect repetition of the movement. In Hindu philosophy, each movement is performed again and again until eventually it becomes so natural and inherent in the dancer that he/she is freed from being conscious of it. At this point, the dancer's mind clears and with each repetition he/she can achieve a new moment of divine enlightenment. Thus, in the realm of Hindu dance, repetition, not change, engenders

liberation and transcendence. It is, perhaps, this basic tenet of Hindu philosophy that allows Roy to continue to write. In the face of the imminent death/failure of the storyteller in the modern world, Roy continues to write, not out of oblivion but rather for “practical purposes in a hopelessly practical world” (34). Although in some ways it would seem that she gave up practicality and embraced “abject defeat” in the moment where she began to reject the needs/comfort of her audience, she finds in this dance an ultimate practicality and her supreme triumph – the survival of herself, her craft, and her culture. The possibility for transcendence through repetition is what makes her choice to write, and to write in English, a positive one.

One law, however, is broken in the Kathakali Men’s performance in the Ayemenem temple<sup>1</sup>. Strictly speaking, kathakali (and all forms of Indian dance) must be performed for an audience. This is according the rules set forth in the Bharata Natya Sastra, a classical treatise on the Hindu theatrical arts, which demand that “the primary aim [of Hindu dance] be to evoke in the spectator the fountain of rasa...the bliss of Oneness with God” (Meri 6). The dancers in Roy’s text however dance only for their gods, “On these occasions, a human audience was welcome, but entirely incidental” (218). Without spectators, the dancers claim the dance for themselves. Yet, at the same time, it seems that the dancers would welcome an audience with the patience (unlike the

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<sup>1</sup> It is important that within this discussion of the “correctness” of the kathakali performance within this chapter that we also allow for the existence of modern, progressive, and experimental forms of classical Indian dance, of which there are many. As Reed reminds us, “Scholars who establish “normative expectations” for “traditional” performances perpetuate colonial thinking by valorizing one version of performance as “true” while dismissing other as corrupted...” (Reed 507).

“small attention spans” (121) of the Western tourists at the resorts<sup>2</sup>) to watch the dance and find rasa. Roy gives them back that element (and thus their agency in the world) by providing them with an audience both within and outside of the text. Rahel and Estha become the performance’s covert spectators within the chapter, while Roy’s written performance of the stories (although also paradoxically abbreviated) give the performance an audience of readers. Here Roy seems to have taken heart and is “danc[ing] as though [she can’t] stop” (223), once again using performance to turn outward and focus on her audience, both Indian and Western. By giving her dancers spectators, she enables their ability to evoke rasa-realization in their audience. This may be Roy’s most significant move towards liberation. La Meri defines rasa-realization as the understanding that “Beauty does not exist outside ourselves. It is not a tangible thing, but an emotion which we create within us...If you admire a beautiful woman, it is not she who possesses the beauty – it is yourself. This is rasa-realization” (6-7). Spectators or audience members gain this deep understanding through witnessing the perfect performance of the sacred texts by the dancers. Once they have come to the point of achieving rasa, they are able to move “one step beyond it [to] Sahaja, that philosophy which teaches its followers to divorce the admiration of beauty from the desire for possession” (Meri 6-7). It is this philosophy that Roy must find a way to pass on to the dominant (Western/male) forces in the world. In a world where a thing of beauty – a

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<sup>2</sup> The performance of kathakali, once for sacred, ritualistic purposes has, in modern India, become a marketable commodity of Kerala. Many travel guides such as [A Rough Guide to India](#) and [The Lonely Planet: India](#), advertise a variety of sites where “shorter tourist-oriented shows ” are performed. One guide even warns that, “Visitors new to kathakali will almost undoubtedly get bored during [the] long programmes” (1355, 1368).

woman, a land, a culture – is no longer an object of desire - a commodity – Roy, her novel, and her country can finally be free.

### CONCLUSION

In The God of Small Things, the kathakali dancers find relief from the forces of capitalism and colonialism in their dance. “[T]he men danced like they couldn’t stop. Like children in a warm house sheltering from a storm. Refusing to emerge and acknowledge the weather. The wind and thunder. The rats racing across the ruined landscape with dollar signs in their eyes. The world crashing around them” (223). Roy, too, finds her own peace in kathakali.

Roy uses Chapter Twelve to establish a model for her own varied resistance to “the world crashing around [her]”(223). The survival of kathakali in the modern landscape provides an interesting (and seemingly oppositional) paradigm for a path of resistance that achieves freedom. Through performance, Roy finds a way to push back against imposed structures – of colonialism, of resistance, and, indeed, of all the oppositional theories constructed to dichotomize our world and perpetuate ranked differences among people. Roy writes as Siva dances to step briefly outside of time and history and the idea of colonizer and colonized. “Siva dances to free the world. With his dance he destroys time and space and evil and good. And the nata (dancer) dances outside time and space and while she dances is conscious of neither good nor evil. There is no time in Natya...” (Meri 8-9). Although the world continues to spin and new colonial situations come about, within the timeless moment of this dance, Roy and her readers may step back and observe the (natural) destruction and survival of a culture. In

the way that the brutal murder of Velutha by the policemen becomes a reenactment of ancient tale of the brutal murder of Dushasana by Bhima, each failure to survive or to resist, becomes part of history, for better or for worse. Thus, Roy's novel, in some small way, begins to make sense of her nation's failure to resist colonialism and begins to accept colonialism as part of India's history.

Through the incorporation of this dance in her novel, Roy finds not just the means to resist or subvert her and her country's colonizers as she does using other resistant elements throughout the novel, but rather she reveals a space for existence outside of their grasp. For Roy, the kathakali performance becomes part of a new means of expression. One that sidesteps the existing power relationships stacked against her, and allows, even just for one night, within the walls of the lonely temple, the pages of this quiet novel, the imagining of an alternative – a means for her to re-invent herself.

In an interview, Roy once described herself, "I was the worst thing a woman could be in Kerala: thin, black, clever" (Pietilainen 111). Both she and her characters are restrained by their position in society, their "No Locust Stand I," (220) but survive through a dance. Ammu lives in her moment of ecstasy when she and Velutha make love for the first time. "She danced for him...She lived" (319). Ammu's dance allows her to live. Roy too resists, searches, and finds a means to live (and keep writing) through a dance in this eloquent story of a kathakali performance.

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