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The Hidden Life of Things: Commodification, Imperialism, and Environmental Feminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Environmental and postcolonial feminists argue that the political economy of imperialism alters a community's social interaction with nature and the land from a paradigm of "the commons" to one that treats nature like a commodity. The theoretical and imaginative perspectives represented in their research and activism have made possible an understanding of the interconnections of gender, class, and caste exploitation and environmental destruction to an underlying pattern of capitalist accumulation, one that generates intensified commodification of labor and land. In this article, I develop an analysis of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* as an environmental feminist critique in order to gain greater insight into the commodity logic of empire. Indeed, it is my argument that the novel's structural principles of nonlinearity, repetition, and layered complexity generate a deeply dialectical view of history, identity, and the environment. Central to this narrative project is the novel's interrogation of the commodity logic that underlies the construction of patriarchal ideological formations under capitalist imperialism. That is, the novel may be said to be a profound meditation on the often confounded ways underlying forces of history and economics are concealed within dominant narratives and habits of thought. The novel contrasts the surface meanings of things with the underlying histories of exploitation, and thus demonstrates how ideological perception is organized but also undermined. In order to fully appreciate the novel's work of demystification, my examination of the novel develops what might be described as a "negative dialectics of environmental feminism" to interrogate—and also to construct alternatives to—the dominant meanings that structure social interaction and relationships with the environment.

A number of readings of *The God of Small Things* have, in fact, focused on the novel as a subaltern history or feminist work with a critique of patriarchal macrohistories that repress multiplicity, complexity and subaltern memories.¹ Also, many literary commentators have observed

¹ See Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, "'The Small Voice of History' in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," *Interventions* 7.3 (November 2005): 369-391; Julie Mullaney,

that Roy's style recalls the narrative techniques of modernist writers, such as James Joyce and William Faulkner, and also the playful postmodern pyrotechnics of Salman Rushdie.² These critical analyses of *The God of Small Things* have yielded valuable insights, especially into Roy's debt to the experimentation of earlier writers, but arguably critics have not placed enough emphasis on the economics of imperialism or on counter-hegemonic challenges to exploitation that are explicit in Roy's critique. When historical materialism is engaged with the insights of environmental and postcolonial feminist theorists such as Bina Agarwal, Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Gayatri Spivak, it becomes possible to read the novel's critique as leveled not against the culture of a monolithic West, but against patriarchal ideologies associated with the political economy of imperialism, which involves both global and local formations of domination.³ Furthermore, it becomes possible to understand how gender oppression is intertwined with other forms of oppression and exploitation, including caste, class, colonialism, and ecological oppression. The term "environmental feminist"—rather than "ecofeminist"—is used here deliberately, after Bina Agarwal's formulation, to emphasize ideological dimensions of a colonial organization of production, rather than cultural discourses isolated from material reality.⁴ I aim to extend the approach of environmental feminism by drawing from the theoretical traditions of the Frankfurt School, and its central intellectual antecedent, the rich body of work on reification by Georg Lukács. Postcolonial critics have recognized the potential contributions to an analysis of imperialism from an engagement with the Frankfurt School, which, according to Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, "shared Said's concerns with the historical and theoretical relations between Western economic/political global domination and Western intellectual production" (7). I argue, in particular, that concepts related to negative dialectics can lend insight into the commodity logic of imperialism, and, specifically, how it pervades perceptions of social relations, identity, and history in the daily lives portrayed in *The God of Small Things*. In general, what is at stake in reading Roy's novel is not just the production of an evermore nuanced

Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things": *A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum, 2002.

² See Chanda Tirthankar, "Sexual/Textual Strategies in *The God of Small Things*," *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 20.1 (Autumn 1997): 38-44; Victor Ramraj, "Arundhati Roy's and Salman Rushdie's Postmodern India," *Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary*. Ed. R.K. Dhawan. London: Sangam Books, 1999: 151-160.

³ See Neil Lazarus, "Introducing Postcolonial Studies," *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Ed. Neil Lazarus. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 12-13. See his discussion of the way postcolonial studies has privileged an analysis of static, unitary discursive modes of domination in isolation from determinate socio-economic conditions. For a critique of the culturalist turn in Subaltern Studies, see Sumit Sarkar, "The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies," *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. Ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi. London: Verso, 2000. 299-323.

⁴ See Bina Agarwal, "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India," *Feminist Studies*. 18.1 (Spring 1992): 119-154.

reading, but, more important, how the novel can contribute to an understanding of the interconnected social and environmental crises in India. In fact, if appreciated for its searching critique of earlier cultures of capitalist imperialism, her novel makes much more sense within the context of her current protests against environmentally and socially devastating dam building in India.

I. *The God of Small Things* as Environmental Feminist Critique

The God of Small Things opens with the return of two of its main characters, dizygotic twins who twenty-three years earlier were embroiled in the traumatic events surrounding two deaths in 1969 involving a Syrian Christian family who live in Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala. The family, we learn from the novel, derive their status from a prominent Syrian Christian descendent, Father E. John Ipe, who in 1876 at the age of seven received blessings from the Patriarch of Antioch. The family prospered under empire, as landowners and government bureaucrats, but since Independence their fortunes have been in decline. Indeed, the failure of Pappachi, the grandson of Reverend Ipe, to achieve distinction as an imperial entomologist will cast a shadow over the family that contributes to their downfall. The family comes to a crisis when in 1969 during the Christmas holidays, it is learned that the grown, divorced daughter of the family, Ammu, is engaged in a sexual liaison with a worker in the family's pickle factory, an untouchable named Velutha. Events spiral out of control, and the crisis eventually leads to his murder by the police and the drowning death of a visiting cousin, Sophie Mol. Members of the family especially affected by the deaths are Ammu's children, a twin brother and sister, Estha and Rahel. It is, in fact, primarily from their perspective, years later when they return from a twenty-three year absence, that the traumatic events are explored. Other characters involved are the twins' bitter and manipulative great aunt "Baby" Kochamma and her cook Kochu Marie; the twins' uncle and mother's brother, Chacko, who is also the father of Sophie Mol; Margaret Kochamma, Sophie Mol's mother and Chacko's ex-wife, who has come for the holidays from Britain; and the twins' grandmother Mammachi, a formidable woman and concert-class violinist, who nonetheless suffered a lifetime of oppression by Pappachi. In fact, it is Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who enforce the patriarchal order at the moment of crisis when they call in the police to apprehend the untouchable Velutha. Also involved is Comrade Pillai, a Communist organizer and calculating politician, who in the end betrays Velutha by failing to protect him from the police.

The novel's inquiry into the underlying causes of these traumatic events—"Where did it all begin?" (32)—alludes in numerous instances to the history of imperialism in Kerala, which we are better able to appreciate with a brief overview of that history. Indeed, as the novel suggests, imperialism in Kerala has a long history. In the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese seized control of the spice trade from Arabians and were the

dominant European power until 1662. The British annexed the coast of Malabar in 1792, and exercised direct control over it, while it ruled indirectly through the princely states of Cochin and Travancore in the south. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, also a significant date in the novel, Kerala, as well as the rest of India, became more intensely exploited by the British, as they imposed profound economic and social restructuring. In Malabar, which the British ruled directly, they conferred repressive powers on the high caste Hindu landlords over a peasant class that consisted of lower caste laborers and Muslims, known as the Mappilas (Desai 41; Jeffrey 162).⁵ In Travancore and Cochin, the British made changes in the law that gave tenants proprietorship rights but demanded tax payments in cash, thus increasing sharecropper hardships. Moreover, the British began establishing first coffee then later rubber and tea plantations on an extensive scale, initiating in the process the development of a large landless proletariat. At the same time, the British relied on collaborators within Kerala, prominently among them were the Nambudiri Brahmin class and also Syrian Christians, who benefited from close contact with British missionaries. In reference to this history, we might recall that in the novel the family's status is linked with official recognition from a church authority, not to mention Baby Kochamma's painful obsession with Father Mulligan. One laudatory field work study of Syrian Christians in Kerala reports: "British planters, towards the latter half of the 19th Century, pioneered the opening of plantations. Christians were employed in these plantations and probably their religious affiliations helped them in getting along with the British planters. Towards the beginning of [the twentieth] century, Christians started opening up new areas for plantations, very much modelled on the European

⁵ For more than a thousand years, there have been three main religions in Kerala: Islam, Christianity and Hinduism were established in Kerala as a result of the trading networks with the Middle East. Christianity, in particular, is said to have come to Kerala in 52 AD when the apostle Thomas arrived. Since then, Syrian Christians have been the premier trading group, and they were to a degree incorporated into a social order of caste and rank defined by Hinduism, so much so that Christians as well as Muslims recognized caste as markers of social status. Within each of the three main religions, there are further subcategories: among those practicing Hinduism, there are Brahmins, Nayars, Ezhavas and Dalits; among Christians, there are Syrian Christians, Latin Catholics and Lower Caste Christians; among Muslims, there are subgroups as well. Prior to colonialism, social relations among these groups formed a hierarchy: the Nambudiri Brahmins, as the wealthiest landlords, occupied the top layer; the Nayars, who performed administrative and military service for the Nambudiris, ranked below them; the Ezhava, as cultivators, artisans and laborers, were relegated further down as an "unclean" caste; and at the bottom, there were the slave castes, the "Pulayas" or "Parayas." The Christians and Muslims, some of whom might share the same status as the Nayars, generally engaged in business and trading activities. Prior to European presence, in order not to break up their landholdings, the Nambudiris designated their first-born sons as the sole heirs to their properties, and other sons were encouraged to form liaisons with Nayar women. The children of these unions became the responsibility of the Nayar joint family, which followed a matrilineal family structure. See Prema Kurien, "Colonialism and Ethnogenesis: A Study of Kerala, India." *Theory and Society* 23 (1994): 385-417.

plantations” (Kurian 41-42). Also, significantly, the new cash economy was stimulated by the establishment of financial institutions within churches and educational organizations set up by the missionaries: “The church parish, with its priest, minister or missionary as fulltime organiser, provided an effective organisation for setting up other institutions. Many of Kerala’s early banks grew out of investment schemes—chit funds—conducted by parish priests for their congregations. Moreover, the administrative hierarchy within Christian churches seemed to mirror the levels of the government itself” (Jeffrey 99). Furthermore, these patriarchal structures, given that they were in place in their churches, households and governing structures, eased inheritance and property transactions with imperialist powers, whereas the Nair Hindus, who were organized in matrilineal joint households, called taravads, in which property is passed down through the mother’s line, experienced significant confusion and financial loss under colonialism’s cash economy. The changes that developed from relations of imperialism had a varying impact on women, though generally, as Jeffrey reporting the comments of an earlier researcher suggests, “the spread of male-dominated monogamous households constituted a ‘retrograde change’” (10).⁶

What emerges overall from this picture of the imperialist system in Kerala is a transformation of the economy with profound consequences for social relations—especially gender and caste relations—and the environment. In general, patterns of accumulation were imposed with divisions of labor that exploited, even intensified, existing caste and gender hierarchies, and thus policies of divide and rule were instituted along with a cash economy that was geared toward exploitation of the land. As Gail Omvedt remarks on imperialism, specifically with India in mind, but also in view of the larger implications, “The accumulation of the earth’s resources for the increase of capital has imposed many facets of a money economy and the logic of production for profit on regions throughout the world, but not primarily by turning people into wage laborers,” but by other means, especially “force and violence against nonwage laborers” (20). Thus, “relations of production took on numerous forms” (20), but even so, ideologically, those forms are interrelated in a system of dominance within, not outside, a capitalist imperialist economy. In a reading of the novel as an environmental feminist critique, *The God of Small Things* allows us to see the invisible ideological dimensions of this system and also its enduring legacy as the remnants of ideologies are sustained and reinvented after the end of imperialism. At the same time, a study of its resistance demonstrates how seemingly irrelevant, marginal

⁶ See Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala became ‘a Model’*. London. Macmillan, 1992. Literacy and sex-ratio statistics bear this out: “It is significant . . . that in 1891 when female literacy among Nayars was 6.9%, among Syrian Christians, it was 2.9%, lower than among Christians (3.9%) who were not Syrians. Sex ratios were also suggestive: among Nayars, 1002 females for every 1000 males; among Syrian Christians, 980:1000” (98).

moments point us toward new possibilities of resistance and sustainable practices.

II. Patriarchy and Commodity Logic: “Paradise Pickles and Preserves”

The title of the opening chapter, “Paradise Pickles and Preserves,” refers, among other things, to the pickle business that Chacko has appropriated from his mother, Mammachi, and reorganized according to a patriarchal model. Chacko’s petty bourgeois actions follow almost to the letter a classic shift in mode of production from home-working to factory-labor that marginalizes bourgeois women in a private sphere, while introducing the super-exploitation of subaltern groups, especially of working-class women and low caste laborers: “Up to the time Chacko arrived, the factory had been a small but profitable enterprise. Mammachi just ran it like a large kitchen. Chacko had it registered as a partnership and informed Mammachi that she was the Sleeping Partner. He invested in equipment (canning machines, cauldrons, cookers) and expanded the labor force” (Roy 55-56). In an analysis guided by environmental feminism, this change can be identified as a process of capitalist accumulation that creates a proletariat class of mostly underpaid female laborers whose work is devalued by their reinscribed status as housewives (Mies 33). In the novel, as if to stress their invisibility, the sentences describing their labor are subjectless passive-tense constructions: “Chopping knives were put down . . . Pickled hands were washed and wiped on cobalt-blue aprons” (163). And, their identities are unhinged from their labor; they are ghostly presences who are merely background to the story, evidenced by a list of their names in a subsequent paragraph (164).

If this analysis is pursued further, it is also possible to understand Chacko’s deliberate effort to craft a brand for the business as an attempt to organize a coherent mythology that will justify the newly reorganized relations of production:

Until Chacko arrived in Ayemenem, Mammachi’s factory had no name. It was Chacko who christened the factory Paradise Pickles & Preserves and had labels designed and printed at Comrade K.N.M. Pillai’s press. At first he had wanted to call it Zeus Pickles & Preserves, but that idea was vetoed because everybody said that Zeus was too obscure and had no local relevance, whereas Paradise did. (56)

This naming is an exercise in commodification—that is, an engagement with a mode of ideological mystification that fictionalizes identity, place, and history. According to Marx’s definition of commodity fetishism, “a commodity is . . . a mysterious thing [because] a definite social relation between men . . . assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (320-21). In “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” from *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács expands on this point and argues that the commodity structure underlies

every aspect of capitalist society. Specifically, Lukács was interested in how social relations that are fictionalized in the commodification process become reified or “robbed of their living content” and thus perceived as mere convention or “second nature.” For Lukács, furthermore, commodification is a structure of alienation—or reification, as he termed it—that renders oblivious an awareness of history and social interdependency.

Generally, characters construct identity and place within a network of local and global commodification.⁷ Baby Kochamma and the cook Kochu Maria, for example, watch hours of satellite television, becoming interpellated within dominant consumer ideology, and thus assume the viewpoint of a white, middle-class subject: Baby Kochamma worries “about the growing numbers of desperate and dispossessed people. She viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture” (29). The absurdity of the ideology is made apparent by the contrast between the magnitude of suffering and her petty obsession with things. With much more tragic consequences, Rahel and Estha compare themselves to the “clean children” in *The Sound of Music*, internalizing a negative image of themselves, which is compounded by the patriarchal inscription of Estha as deviant and dirty during the sexual assault by the Lemondrink man (100). The outcome, for the children, is a deeply embedded sense of isolation and traumatized paralysis. As a result of earlier colonial ideologies, most of the characters have interpellated an image of themselves as inferior, as living in a world apart on the margins. As I hope to show in the next section, an analysis of the legacy of colonial ideologies reveals that commodity production is at the root of these structures of oppression and alienation. The “history” that has such a magical force in the novel is nothing less than the secret history of exploitation that is at the core of capitalist imperialism.

III. Uncovering Hidden Histories of the Commodity: “The History House”

Underlying many of the oppressive attitudes and actions in *The God of Small Things* are references—sometimes oblique, sometimes not—to the invisible force of history with a capital H. Represented in turn as a “sickening thud” and a pervasive smell “like old roses on the breeze” (54), history is characterized as a determinate, inevitable force that “collect[s] its dues from those who break its law” (54, 268). As these examples indicate, *The God of Small Things* often alludes to a violent undercurrent of repression, and—as the recurring reference to the “love laws” suggests—the novel also often makes apparent its ideological workings within patriarchal constructions of imprisoning social spaces, rigid boundaries, and painful divisions. In terms of the analysis provided by Lukács, it is by means of reification—according to his definition of the

⁷ See Janet Thorman, “The Ethical Subject of *The God of Small Things*,” *JPCS: Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society* 8.2 (Fall 2003): 299-307.

concept as an ideological structure of alienation—that social spaces and identities are rendered as separate, disconnected, and divided, so as to conceal their interdependency. For example, in the patriarchal division of private and public domains of economic activity, the exploitative dependency of the market on the realm of private production is concealed. Indeed, in any number of ideological divisions, including the division between the imperial core and the periphery, or the division of the elite high-castes from the subaltern low-castes, or, more broadly, in the patriarchal dualism of culture from nature—in all of these cases—dependency and exploitation are disavowed. The result is reification, which, as the novel tells it, follows the traumatized loss of social connection: “Isolated things that didn’t mean anything. As though the intelligence that decodes life’s hidden patterns—that connects reflections to images, glints to light, weaves to fabrics, needles to thread, walls to rooms, love to fear to anger to remorse—was suddenly lost” (215).

The novel locates the epicenter of this nexus of ideology and violence in the colonial rubber estate formerly occupied by Kairu Saipu, and identified by the children as “The History House.” In a tongue-in-cheek use of the cliché, the novel dubs the former plantation the “Heart of Darkness” after Conrad’s novel, and the now tired associations with it are ironically piled on. For example, the plantation’s owner, Kairu Saipu, is thought of as an agent of colonialism “gone native,” and, as with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, his madness is attributed to his association with a native place (rather than to his active participation in an unjust system of unequal exchange).⁸ At the same time, the novel unearths from the clichés that the transactions that take place in the “Heart of Darkness” constitute the secret heart of this violence, which is associated with a political economy of imperialism: that is to say, these transactions are based not on equal exchange, but rather on a false perception of equivalence that is imposed on what are grossly unequal relations. This “cost of living” is exacted by means of brutal force.

Environmental and many postcolonial feminists, as I mentioned, argue that the political economy of imperialism and the establishment of extractive commodity production was not, in Maria Mies’s words, “evolutionary but violent and based on accumulation of wealth through conquest and warfare” (145). The History House, as the estate house of a rubber plantation, represents the epicenter of this violent economy. Rather than a separate domestic sphere, the house is alluded to as that place where “History collects its dues” and where “the sober, steady brutality, the economy of it all” is calculated (292). And, as I will say more about in a moment, this is the place where history catches up with Velutha, as he is beaten within an inch of his life by “History’s Henchmen” (292).

⁸ Kari Saipu’s madness, the fact that he has “gone native,” is also implicitly attributed to his same-sex relations with an adolescent male villager, thus associating deviant sexualities with non-European culture, and also previous violations of heteronormative patriarchy with the History House.

Furthermore, by locating this violence on the grounds of a rubber plantation, the novel is also implying that the source of oppression is not found in some vague human condition, but in the capitalization of the land within the specific history of imperialism in India. Indeed, the commodification of land had a devastating impact on India's agriculture, as Mike Davis argues in his recent book. In a study that demonstrates the renewed relevance of the work of Rosa Luxemburg on imperialism, Davis attributes widespread famine in India and China in the nineteenth century to the forcible commodification of agriculture, which by "eliminat[ing] village-level reciprocities that traditionally provided welfare to the poor during crises" left millions vulnerable to starvation and hardship (10). In order to think through this idea, it is worth quoting in full the insights of Luxemburg:

Each new colonial expansion is accompanied, as a matter of course, by a relentless battle of capital against the social and economic ties of the natives, who are also forcibly robbed of their means of production and labour power . . . Accumulation, with its spasmodic expansion, can no more wait for, and be content with, a natural internal disintegration of non-capitalist formations and their transition to commodity economy, than it can wait for, and be content with, the natural increase of the working population. Force is the only solution open to capital; the accumulation of capital, seen as a historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon. (qtd. in Davis 10-11)

Furthermore, in Gayatri Spivak's critique of trends in Marxist theory that attribute the dynamism of capitalism to Eurocentric teleologies or benign technological advances, she points to the exception of Samir Amin's theory of imperialism that foregrounds the practices of repression and domination as part of the global economics of accumulation: "The great shifting currents of global imperialism rather than the teleological narrative of capitalism . . . become the logic of [Amin's] analysis. This would allow for the possibility of making the full grid of dominations, as well as exploitation, our analytical tool kit, rather than consider domination as merely the subtext of the economic as the most abstract logical instance" (89).

With this altered analysis of imperialism in mind, we are able to recognize that the acts of violent repression suffered by Velutha in the History House are not generated by age-old caste prejudice but rather are perpetrated by agents of a patriarchal order for which coercion is central, rather than marginal, to the requirements of capitalist accumulation. This violent history of capitalist imperialism is never far below the surface in the novel, and it implies a shared legacy of its victims when at the train station from which a deeply traumatized Estha will depart following the murderous events of 1969, we are provided with a grim catalogue of famine victims, beggars, and subaltern: "Gray in the stationlight. Hollow people. Homeless. Hungry. Still touched by last year's famine . . . A blind man without eyelids . . . a leper without fingers . . . A man sitting on a red weighing machine unstrapp[ing] his artificial leg. An old lady vomit[ing]"

(Roy 285). What is significant to notice is how the novel associates Estha's traumatic departure with casualties from ongoing conquest and exploitation.

In the novel, then, the History House is center stage. It is from there that the invisible lines of oppression and violence radiate outwards in a system of exploitation that depends on multiple dimensions of patriarchal domination, from the coercive enforcement of separate spheres, to the institutional violence used to put down subaltern insurgency, to the perpetuation of structures of global marginalization, and the rationalization of nature. Indeed, the novel hints that these dimensions of patriarchal domination are intertwined, mutually reinforcing, though sometimes contradictory. For example, it is Velutha's status as an untouchable that allows the Ipe family to exploit his labor in their pickle factory. A wayward daughter's affair with him threatens to blur the boundaries between class and caste, and given that the family's status is already tenuous, this latest threat pushes them toward greater acts of repression.

A deeper look at social space that is mapped in the novel shows that women live with multiple restrictions.⁹ At times, it pokes fun at the dour, confining mood created by separate spheres, which is overtly associated with patriarchy: "It was a grand old house, the Ayemenem House, but aloof-looking. As though it had little to do with people who lived in it. Like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their wholehearted commitment to life" (157). In another passage on the house, this one playfully mocking gender-laden notions of respectability, gender and sexuality are linked with class status: "The doors had not two, but four shutters of paneled teak so that in the old days, ladies could keep the bottom half closed, lean their elbows on the ledge and bargain with visiting vendors without betraying themselves below the waist. Technically, they could buy carpets, or bangles, with their breasts covered and their bottoms bare. Technically" (157). While this passage evokes light-hearted transgressions against the control of women's sexuality, in others, the reality of limited possibilities is conveyed by a weary, despairing tone. Enforced spatial divisions are metaphors for the gender identity adopted by Mammachi, whose identity is described as "like a room with dark drapes drawn across a bright day" (159). Ammu's reflections on the boundedness of her social space in this world are memorable as well: "For herself she knew that there would be no more chances. There was only Ayemenem now. A front verandah and a back verandah. A hot river and a pickle factory" (42).

As a divorced woman formerly married to a Hindu man and now a single mother of "Half-Hindu Hybrids," Ammu's lack of inheritance

⁹ For a gender and class analysis of the reinvented restrictions wrought by colonialism on women in private and public spheres, see Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1990.

rights (which the children memorably translate as “no Locusts Stand I”) is justified in the eyes of dominant ideology. Ammu should know she “really has no right to be” in Ayemenem House at all (44), in the opinion of Baby Kochamma or Mammachi, both of whom ironically maintain a rigid, unchanging view of respectability and status. Reflections from Mammachi, a character who herself suffers from her husband’s brutal oppression, indicate her interpellation of ideologies of class and gender:

Mammachi’s world was arranged that way. If she was invited to a wedding in Kottayam, she would spend the whole time whispering to whoever she went with, *“the bride’s maternal grandfather was my father’s carpenter. Kunjukutty Eapen? His great-grandmother’s sister was just a midwife in Trivandrum. My husband’s family used to own this whole hill.”* (160)

Mammachi’s bitter rumor-mongering reveals that her world is constructed on fragile scaffolding of social relations that is beginning to collapse under pressure from social change. In such circumstances, social contradictions eventually drive her—and other members of the community—to hideous acts of repression aimed at containing subaltern insurgency.

Ideological maintenance of caste hierarchies, as portrayed in the novel, follows much the same pattern as other practices of patriarchal domination. Just as ideology is like an image in a camera obscura (as described by Marx), elite ideology projects an upside down world, or the opposite of what is true. For example, instead of projecting the view that the wealth of a community is generated by those who labor to create it—the untouchable workers, the factory hands, the caregivers, the nurturing foundation provided by the land—this ideology attributes the source of wealth to those who legally own it, and the debt must be paid to them. In their eyes, Velutha “owed everything to [the] family” (247). As an ideology that conceals exploitation, reification in this instance facilitates a disavowal of human connection and dependency, which is reinforced by restricting the visibility of untouchables. Mammachi recalls “a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint”; “[In her day], Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads” (71). Furthermore, when Velutha transgresses those restrictions, he is constructed as a sexual, transgender deviant, an “AC-DC,” to reinforce gender and caste subordination. In the social world of the novel, elite insecurity demands the heteronormative drama of humiliation and disdain.

Ironies abound as the elite class, which must continually strive for hegemony in the local context, experiences marginalization in the global context within the contradictory logic of their own privilege. Mimicry of the culture of imperialism is at once, paradoxically, an assertion of privilege at the local level but a trap of degradation at the global level, one that imprisons them as outsiders, as Chacko remarks, to their own history: “Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and

unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside” (51). Chacko articulates the conditions of his and his family’s alienation, but he cannot overcome them. Unable to achieve a coherent identity from the tensions of home and world, Chacko cannot resist the advantages that the patriarchal order bestows on him, and so his non-identity within the dominant system alternates between despair (his “Oxford moods”) and pretend rebellion as a “self-proclaimed Marxist” who sexually harasses women factory workers (62-63).

In the novel’s opening chapter, the overview of Baby Kochamma’s life portrays “in miniature” these dilemmas. In Baby’s world, the cultural boundaries of caste and class are rigidly enforced, and, in her old age, paranoia that these boundaries might be crossed has transformed her into a hoarder and shut-in, who spends long hours indulging in passive voyeurism watching satellite television. Her nickname “Baby” and grotesque embodiment imply the ways her conformity to ideals of passive femininity has resulted in a distorted life, one led backwards, from active engagement to docile acceptance of the status quo. Her elite status derives from the comprador relations with British colonial power, and increasingly as she ages, she experiences the anxieties of living on its margin, always striving, yet always failing, to emulate the English. Her dominant mode is mimicry, as is clear in her attempts to impose English on the children, which involves “eavesdropp[ing] relentlessly on the twins’ private conversations.” Rebellion has its costs, quite literally, when Baby withholds allowance when the children disobey: “whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money” (36). Her ornamental gardening, as well, which she pursues after training in Rochester, New York, involves the cultivation of an aesthetic from elsewhere; that is, her creation in Kerala of “a lush maze of dwarf hedges, rocks and gargoyles” may just as well grace the lawns of middle-class America (27).

Just as deeply troubled, if not more, is Pappachi’s attempted assimilation into the culture of imperialism. The photograph of him dressed in riding crops reveals as much:

He was a photogenic man, dapper and carefully groomed, with a little man’s largish head. In the photograph he had taken care to hold his head high enough to hide his double chin, yet not so high as to appear haughty. His light brown eyes were polite yet maleficent, as though he was making an effort to be civil to the photographer while plotting to murder his wife. He had a little fleshy knob on the center of his upper lip that drooped down over his lower lip in a sort of effeminate pout—the kind that children who suck their thumbs developed. He had an elongated dimple on his chin, which only served to underline the threat of a lurking manic violence. A sort of contained cruelty. He wore khaki jodhpurs though he had never ridden a horse in his life . . . An ivory handled riding crop lay neatly across his lap. (50)

He is “polite yet maleficent” and child-like yet violent with a head out of proportion with his body. As with the other characters, the inconsistencies

in his appearance arguably reflect internalized social contradictions, in his case, his conflicted position in a political economy of imperialism as at once oppressor and oppressed. Indeed, his institutional affiliation within the cadre of imperial scientists working on behalf of capitalist imperialism indicates much more profound conformity to its epistemology of space and nature. That Pappachi is an entomologist is a significant detail because as scholars have demonstrated, commercial forestry and land management under imperialism relied on the knowledge gathered by botanists, geographers, and foresters. As I discuss in the next section, Pappachi practices an instrumental approach to nature that is rooted in capitalist rationality, which is coexistent with his brutalization of his wife and daughter—and also with his confinement of them in a domestic space. As I have argued, patriarchal control of nature and women, by means of violent repression, makes exploitation by imperialism possible. Pappachi's moth, alluded to frequently in the novel during moments of despair, may thus evoke not only his rage and disappointment at his failure to receive recognition for discovering a new species of moth, but also, as I will say more about in the next section, the legacy of imperialism under a patriarchal ideology of the domination and exploitation of nature.

IV. Instrumental Reason and Commodity Production: “Pappachi's Moth”

Evoked by the images and stories surrounding “Pappachi's Moth,” an epistemology of imperialism, in which scientific inquiry is subordinated to the ends of empire, is a powerful subtext to the experience of oppression in the novel. As the novel explains it, Pappachi discovered a moth while serving as a scientist in the civil service, but he never received his due recognition:

Pappachi had been an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute. After Independence, when the British left, his designation was changed from Imperial Entomologist to Joint Director, Entomology . . . His life's greatest setback was not having had the moth that he had discovered named after him . . . In the years to come, even though he had been ill-humored long before he discovered the moth, Pappachi's Moth was held responsible for his black moods and sudden bouts of temper. (48)

In fact, the novel makes ironic allusions to “Pappachi's Moth” whenever characters experience emotional cruelty, neglect, or physical violence as a result of a failure to adhere to a prescribed rule or a role. For example, when Rahel is disciplined by Ammu for speaking against Baby Kochamma, her feeling of shame and rejection is figured by a moth: “a cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts landed lightly on Rahel's heart” (107). Sometimes condensed are the images of the moth, history as shadowy stalker, and other recurring motifs of traumatic memory, such as this one evoking the church ceiling where Sophie Mol's funeral is held: “Shadows followed them. Silver jets in a blue church sky, like moths in a beam of light” (145). The description of Pappachi's study alludes to the legacy of his cruelty: “In Pappachi's study, mounted butterflies and moths

had disintegrated into small heaps of iridescent dust . . . , leaving the pins that had impaled them naked. Cruel” (148). In an environmental feminist analysis, this image of living things reduced to dead matter is evidence of an instrumental rationality, a practice of science subordinated to the ends of accumulation. As Carolyn Merchant sums it up, “the transformation of nature from a living, nurturing mother to inert, dead and manipulable matter was eminently suited to the exploitation imperative of growing capitalism” (qtd. in Shiva 17).

The Indian physicist Vandana Shiva is perhaps most well-known as an environmental feminist critic who has done extensive research into the role of commercial forestry and agricultural land management in facilitating the aims of capitalist accumulation, both during the age of imperialism and after. Even as her work is marred by some deeply problematic assumptions of gender and cultural essentialism, as critics have enumerated, her investigation is nonetheless valuable for developing a tireless analysis of the features of capitalist reason, notably the devastating results for the environment, women, and subaltern groups that are generated by commodity production organized according to dualistic, linear, and homogenizing logics in contrast to an ecological rationality that presumes reciprocity and interconnectedness (Shiva 22).¹⁰ In her words, the dominant approach to knowledge is “‘reductionist’ because it reduced the capacity of humans to know nature by excluding knowers and other ways of knowing, and it reduced the capacity of nature to creatively regenerate and renew itself by manipulating it as inert and fragmented matter” (22). Instead of entering into the extensive debates about the role of science in empire, I think it is possible here to appreciate Shiva’s analysis as a critique of capitalist rationality, rather than science per se, especially if we consider that “scientific forestry” or “rational land management,” as Ramachandra Guha points out, were “euphemisms” for state control and commercial land management under the British rather than legitimate scientific practices (91).¹¹ Armed with an insightful analysis of the damaging impact of commodity production under imperialism, Shiva analyzes specific contexts of feminist struggle, to name a few examples, in the 1970s Chipko movement against commercial forestry in the Himalayas, and in frequent disruptions to cash-cropping at the height of the Green Revolution.

¹⁰ For critiques of Shiva’s essentialism, see Bina Agarwal, “The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India.” *Feminist Studies*. 18.1 (Spring 1992): 119-154. Also, see Meera Nanda, “History is What Hurts: A Materialist Feminist Perspective on the Green Revolution and Its Ecofeminist Critics.” *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Lives*. Ed. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham. New York: Routledge, 1997. 364-394.

¹¹ See Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996; Ramachandra Guha, *How Much Should a Person Consume? Environmentalism in India and the United States*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2006.

The environmental feminist analysis of the deadening objectification of capitalist reason developed by Shiva and many more—even as it sometimes becomes prey to reactionary assumptions of gender and class—recalls specific features of the materialist critique of bourgeois thought, both its idealist and empirical varieties, developed by Lukács: “What is important to recognise clearly is that all human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the objective forms of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature” (131). In the novel, a nagging feeling, a subtle undercurrent of anxiety, hints at the oppression of abstraction. Not just the dead moth but also the recurring images of corpses and dismembered body parts are indicative of this anxiety. Under the epistemological system of capitalist imperialism in the novel, bodies, especially women’s, are stripped of their animate, dynamic qualities and regarded as objects and things; just as are the land and nature, bodies are turned into property. The image of Ammu’s body “jiggling and sliding” as it is transported to the crematorium is especially memorable, as is the frequently interjected imagery of Velutha’s mangled body. Ammu becomes conscious of it when she thinks of herself as an object that is consumed by marriage much like firewood by cremation. Also, occasional references to the scene of her humiliating treatment at the police station, when an officer “tapped her breasts with his baton . . . As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket” (Roy 9-10), are a reminder of her status as a commodity. Still other examples include Ammu’s dreams of the one-armed man, the constant imagery of Velutha’s body parts, and the dismemberment suffered during his beating. As a repressive patriarchal ideology, this fractured incoherence also profoundly defines the sense of embodiment felt by Pappachi himself, as I mentioned. Characters alternate between a painful awareness and an intuition of this fragmentation and objectification. For the children, that awareness of a fractured state is grimly figured by the negative counter-images of animals: “Vellya Paapen [Velutha’s father] had assured the twins that there was no such thing in the world as a black cat . . . only black cat-shaped holes in the universe” (79). After the sexual assault on Estha, in particular, he internalizes complex colonial patriarchal assumptions that at once leave him with a profound sense of objectification, shame, and inferiority. Ever afterwards, he strives to wipe away those feelings by constantly bathing and cleaning.

V. Non-Identity and Resistance: Subverting Commodity Logic “The River in the Boat”

It is against a complex hegemonic formation, then, that experiments with resistance and alternatives are explored in the novel. In Roy’s skillful hands, narrative innovations associated with modernist and postmodernist writers are exploited as tools of resistance. Indeed, the novel’s multiple narrative strategies should be read as resistance because they reveal the underlying dialectical complexity and contradiction just below the surface

of things. Resistance becomes imaginable because, in Adorno's words, contradictory significations make possible "non-identity" and thus new insights into the socio-economic processes that underlie the given world: "As the concept is experienced as non-identical, as inwardly in motion, it is no longer purely itself" (*Negative Dialectics* 157). In acts of non-identity, the novel can be said to stage creative engagement with the signifiers of history, nature, and identity that opens up new meanings and possibilities, at the same time that it provides a glimpse of new patterns and relationships—patterns that reject the instrumental logic of exchange value for ecological value. The assertion of ecological value, in particular, suggests that Roy's work shares a great deal with contemporary environmental feminist critique.

Among the most effectively employed narrative strategies that should first be mentioned is the novel's experimentation with history, memory, and nonlinearity; so much is about loss and decay. It is about seeing the world through a prism of memory that alters perspective and gives objects a magical, strange quality, as if they are other worldly. Telling the story in a nonlinear fashion also affects memory and perspective. Because readers learn about the deaths of characters before they die, the novel invites an inquiry into the complex web of underlying forces that lead to traumatic losses and death. Knowing that a character is beaten, abused, or murdered, we look for signs of impending catastrophe in the details of the lives introduced to us. It is a narrative technique that emulates the perspective of Benjamin's angel of history, who being blown into the future, faces backwards as the wreckage of history accumulates. Benjamin writes: "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; . . . This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows" (257-58). From this perspective, we can glimpse at the magnitude of loss and suffering that is under the surface of official histories. In the novel, Rahel encounters a figure that might be compared to an angel of history. As Rahel watches, a sickly woman across the aisle on a commuter train in New York coughs up phlegm that she "wrapped in twists of newspapers," which, in turn, "she arranged [in] little packages in neat rows on the empty seat in front of her as though she was setting up a phlegm stall" (69). Rahel reflects: "Memory was like that woman on the train. Insane in the way she sifted through dark things in a closet and emerged with the most unlikely ones—a fleeting look, a feeling" (69). Rahel finds some comfort in the woman's "madness" even as the encounter conjures up the random stream of her last images of Velutha: "A sourmetal smell, like steel bus rails, and the smell of the bus conductor's hands from holding them. A young man with an old man's mouth" (70).

A related narrative device that the novel deploys for subverting dominant history is the juxtaposition which creates new perspectives on events, an awareness of new patterns or connections. Using a technique generally identified with modernist and postmodernist writers, *The God of*

Small Things plays with unlikely combinations and contrasting elements. In the parlance of negative dialectics, it creates new “constellations” and “configurations.” In rejecting analytical reasoning that develops a theoretical concept and then applies that conceptualization to map phenomena, Adorno, after Benjamin, was interested in a cognitive method by which a generality might emerge from, rather than be imposed on, a pattern perceived in a configuration of details. As a frequently quoted line from Benjamin’s study on *Trauerspiel* suggests, “ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars” (qtd. in Eagleton 328). Furthermore, that pattern was then to be related not to a static set of universal rules or ideas, but rather to the socio-economic organization of relations at a specific historical conjuncture. As Eagleton has said of Adorno’s method: “What this method then delivers is a kind of poetic or novelistic sociology in which the whole seems to consist of nothing but a dense tessellation of graphic images; and to this extent it represents an aestheticized model of social inquiry” (330). It is this sort of inquiry that the novel sets up in its opening pages as it announces its intention to sort through the remains of images surrounding the traumatic events of the murder and death of central characters:

That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house—the charred clock, the singed photography, the scorched furniture—must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for.

Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story. (32)

The story will be reconstituted from the details and images that remain, but new meanings will be gleaned from the new configurations that can be discovered in memory. The novel is experimenting with a “transformed relation of part and whole” as it consistently refers to the force of “History” below the surface of things, and thus to a dialectics that seems to work off-stage from the action to enforce rules and boundaries. The novel is insisting on a re-examination of the determinate relation between large forces and small events and between the universal and the particular, according to which in dominant patriarchal logic the “small things” and particulars are all but subsumed, destroyed, or brutalized. In this regard, as critics have noted, the recurring motif of “small things” that are not represented in a larger story may be compared to the social category of the subaltern not included in Marxist or Nationalist paradigms.¹²

A significant event in the novel from which memories and histories spring is the protest march. The narrative of the event encapsulates a montage of multiple discourses, time-frames, and viewpoints that disrupt and reconfigure social hierarchies as well as hegemonic hierarchies of discourse between personal memory and history. The narration, in effect,

¹² See, especially, Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, “‘The Small Voice of History’ in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,” *Interventions* 7.3 (2005): 369-391.

provides new contexts or “new constellations” from which to construct the past, and thus to break apart the perception of history as a determinate, inevitable force. In Kerala’s past, a variety of complex social movements emerged in struggle against the control of capitalist imperialism. Specifically, challenges to imperialism—and also to its collaborators—came from the landless agricultural and rural workers, whose numbers had increased dramatically with the introduction of plantations (Franke and Chasin 25). These groups and agitators against caste later became the base of the Communist Party in Kerala. During the nineteenth century, there were many uprisings against rural exploitation, particularly in Malabar, where, as I mentioned, the British had colluded with high-caste Hindu landlords against Muslim tenants. In the 1920s, amid the upheaval of anti-colonial agitation and civil disobedience campaigns, there were events that galvanized opposition not just against the British but against elite exploitation in general. The 1920s witnessed the 1921 Mapilla uprising of mostly Muslim tenants in Malabar and the 1924 Siva Temple Satyagraha against the refusal of temple entry to low-castes. There were also numerous worker strikes organized in the 1930s by the then-rising Communist Party. Some overlap among these activities has been documented. In 1938, during the largest civil disobedience protest, for example, participants marched to nearby Alleppey to support striking workers there. A rich welter of cross-fertilizations is represented at the protest march in the novel as well: Murlidharan, a homeless veteran of the Indian National Army, significantly occupies the crossroads, where marchers have been gathered by the “Travancore-Cochin Marxist Labour Union” protesting labor but also caste and women’s oppression. As the novel recounts, after Independence, and shortly after Kerala became a state, the Communist Party was elected, and in 1959, a major land reform bill became law, but it was overturned when the Communists lost the government a few months later amid the chaos brought about by the Congress Party, and it was not until 1969 that major land reform was instituted again: “By this time, tenants had become disillusioned with parliamentary processes, and in many areas they took matters into their hands, planting red flags on their tenancies” (Franke and Chasin 62).

The widespread unrest recounted in the novel reflects the break with the orthodox Left in India that was to usher in a wave of “new social movements,” which Gail Omvedt defines as “those against particular forms of exploitation not recognized in traditional class analysis,” including Naxalites, anti-caste, women’s, environmental, farmers, and adivasi movements (304). As Omvedt says of the late 1960s and early 1970s emergence of the new Left in India that challenged the development model of intensified, industrial commodity production and that model’s reliance on the super-exploitation of land and labor, “nonbrahmans, peasants, dalits, women, and the possibilities of a different kind of ‘development’ from the dominant industrial model were outside the framework of the Marxism that was being created in India” (18). The novel represents this era with the dynamism and multiple demands of the

protestors that exceed wage appeals, and by means of unconventional narrative, its choppy, fragmented presentation of the protest march mirrors the social and political crisis of hegemony. It calls attention to the new “Naxalite” edgy anger of the protestors whose challenge to dominant social rules and political power will haunt family members for years to come (67). The family catches a glimpse of Velutha at the march, and mocked by the protestors and forced to chant the marchers’ demands, Baby Kochamma will later on take out her fear and anger at being called a “ModaldiSP” on Velutha by urging that police arrest him. At the same time, the perspective here provides a glimpse of the fertile interplay of personal and political identity, potentially reshaping both. No doubt the devastating critique of Communism in this section is problematic, as is its representation of Comrade Pillai as repulsive operator, but, given that it conveys the tone and dynamism of new Left social movements, it is erroneous to claim, as Aijaz Ahmad and others have, that the novel constitutes a wholesale critique of the Indian Left.¹³

In its unconventional presentation of history, the novel shares with Adorno’s negative dialectics an exploration of what Eagleton calls “‘constellatory epistemology,’ [one which] sets its face against the Cartesian or Kantian moment of subjectivity, less concerned to ‘possess’ the phenomenon than to liberate it into its own sensuous being and preserve its disparate elements in all their irreducible heterogeneity” (329). This narrative approach is evident not just in the subversion of dominant history, but at the same time in its approach to nature. The novel arguably strives for liberatory moments in small ironic reversals at play in descriptions of nature; for example, “strange insects appeared like ideas” (Roy 11). In some instances, language is estranged when the signifier’s latent associations are made manifest: for example, the children mock the task of pronunciation in their spelling of it as “Prer NUN sea ayshun” (36). In still other instances, an ironic metaphor reverses the typical comparison of the social world with nature: “Still birds slid by on moving wires, like unclaimed baggage at the airport” (83). The figurative moment calls attention to the repression of language that renders animate, living nature into so much dead matter. Also, the dustbins in the Cochin airport that are shaped like kangaroos are transformed in Rahel’s eyes into so many injured, living presences (133). This recalls the ecofeminist analysis by Val Plumwood of “counter-hegemonic practices of recognition and openness . . . [that might] allow us to re-animate nature both as agent and potentially as communicative other” (177). Environmental feminist theorist Carol J. Adams argues that empathy for the particularity of individual animals, which are otherwise consumed as “meat,” can be

¹³ In the figure of Chacko and his shadow collaborator, Comrade Pillai, the novel is parodying the corruption of institutionalized Marxism in India. Clearly, as many commentators have remarked, this is a problematic representation in a neoliberal global context that welcomes such parody as a confirmation of its ideology and triumph. For a critique of the novel’s politics, see Aijaz Ahmad’s criticism in “Reading Arundhati Roy Politically.” *Frontline* (8 August 1997): 103-108.

restored by “naming and claiming the absent referent” (189). The neglect of this particularity is starkly conveyed when the police crush and ignore the wildlife on their way to raid the History House: “They trudged past darter birds . . . , drying their sodden wings spread out like laundry against the sky. Past egrets. Cormorants. Adjutant storks. Sarus cranes looking for space to dance. Purple herons with pitiless eyes. Deafening, their wraark wraark wraark. Motherbirds and their eggs” (289). At the same time, its figurative language operates to emphasize how nature can be historically constructed, in an image, for example when darter birds are compared to laundry or when rain is compared to gunfire: “Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, plowing it up like gunfire” (4). Furthermore, in these dynamic figurations of nature, and conversely of the social world, both nature and history are rejected as first principles, and instead the novel stages their dynamic interaction. On the one hand, the novel reveals what is perceived to be natural and unchanging to be historically constructed, demonstrating, as Adorno famously quipped, that “nature is not natural at all.” On the other, it is shown that what is perceived to have developed as complete and finished (the inevitability of historical unfolding) is actually incomplete and tentative. Thus, we should understand the novel’s subversion of dominant history as interrelated with, in fact dependent on, its reassertion of the dynamism and living presence of nature.

This dual critique is especially noticeable in the critique of Pappachi’s instrumental classification, which was discussed earlier. In resistance to the pure abstraction of capitalist classification, where rationality subsumes the natural world under its systematic sway, Adorno argues that negativity should be applied. Indeed, he argues that the critic unleashes the negativity “stored up” in objects: “Objectively, dialectics means to break the compulsion to achieve identity and to break it by means of the energy stored up in that compulsion and congealed in its objectifications” (*Negative Dialectics* 157). Instances of this critique in the novel can be located in the frequent use of images of insects eating away at history’s edges. An especially ironic example is the portrayal of the meticulous records of insect life in Pappachi’s study, many years after his death, being destroyed by insects: “Silverfish tunneled through the pages, burrowing arbitrarily from species to species, turning organized information into yellow lace” (Roy 149). Perhaps not coincidentally, this image recalls Benjamin’s own image of brushing history against the grain when he suggested that “the eternal is more like lace trimmings on a dress than like an idea” (qtd. in Adorno, *Prisms* 231).

One might add to this insight Adorno’s technique for challenging dominant ideologies of history and nature with what he called “concrete particulars.” As Buck-Morss explains it, Adorno was interested in evoking the unrecognized dimensions of particular phenomena that simultaneously make them what they are in all their particularity but also make them more than what they are and thus hint at their mediation by larger forces. As she says of Adorno’s notion of concrete particular: “For Adorno,

‘concreteness’ necessitated grounding the particular in its dialectical, mediated relationship to the totality . . . The object was more than itself” (73). Furthermore, “The particular was not identical to itself. . . It was more than the tautological ‘rose is a rose’ because of its mediated relationship to society” (Buck-Morss 76). In engaging the concrete particular, the novel demonstrates that social identities and concepts contain their opposite. Things are not identical with themselves.

With this notion in mind, we can appreciate all the doubling in the novel as an attempt to reveal a social dialectic underlying fixed, fetishized identities and concepts. A notable example is Velutha’s claim to have a brother, Urumban, and that it is Urumban, not Velutha, who is seen by the family at the Naxalite march. Velutha and Urumban are, of course, one and the same, but by giving us an outlandish imaginary alter ego, the novel calls attention to how Velutha’s identity is restricted to his social image of the passive, compliant untouchable. Indeed, the playful intermingling of the twins’ identities is making a similar point about notions of identity as fixed, often binary, and restricted. As the twins’ telepathic communications suggest, identity is highly mediated by others. By adopting imaginative names, characters also assert non-identity. As Buck-Morss says of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s insights on naming: “The ‘name’ paid attention to the object’s non-identity by identifying it as particular and unique; it imitated nature whereas the concept subordinated it” (90). In the novel, the significance of naming is brought to our attention when the family sighs in relief on learning that a dead elephant in the road is not the beloved temple elephant Kochu Thomban (146). Also, as the children often go by any number of names, the most elaborate of which must be Estha’s nom de theatre, Esthapappychachen Kuttappen Peter Mon., they undercut singular, one-dimensional representations of identity.

The novel’s acts of non-identity, then, infuse the seemingly trivial or sentimental with critical edginess and complex pathos. As Adorno might have said, the trivial is never insignificant. An undercurrent of desperation and anger runs through even the most seemingly inconsequential things. For example, many of the games played by Rahel and Estha are consistently tinged with an apprehensive mood of contingency planning and constructed with jerry-rigged materials and hodgepodge paraphernalia from Ayemenem House. Also, if we consider the mud hut where Velutha and his brother live, we might notice that it is represented with organic metaphors, as if it had sprung from seed, but this image is disrupted by an awareness of messy details of suffering, hardship, and mortality in the image of Kuttapen’s lonely death vigil and his constant haunted recollections of his mother’s slow, agonizing death. Furthermore, even if the hut is thought of as a subversive place in the absence of spatial divisions of the bourgeois household, that absence is the result of poverty, not the conscious construction of an alternative, as the impoverished mimicry of the bourgeois household makes clear. More important, the fantastic elements of the setting of the night-time trysts between Ammu and Velutha in the History House derive not from unrealistic, false details,

but from the tensions of negatively charged nature because it fails to adhere to an ideal. In particular, the spider, with which they co-exist in the house, implies qualities of not only endearment but also danger and abjection. Such seemingly trivial details invest the actions of Ammu and Velutha with specificity and uncertainty, and thus add more depth to their resistance of dominant prescriptions of gender and caste. The couple attempt to establish a place, with some measure of a tangible reality, all the more to emphasize their impossible and daring claim to history and the world as their own.¹⁴

VI. Residual and Emergent Challenges to Neoliberalism: “God’s Own Country”

The result of the attempt to reinvent their lives as they experiment with subversive forms of social interaction is failure. Velutha is beaten and killed; Ammu is sent away and dies alone impoverished; the permanently traumatized children are paralyzed emotionally and politically. The family is in disarray, the home a shell of its former glory. However, the novel’s ending has the effect of a mobius strip that doubles back on itself, and so it is difficult to make final pronouncements about struggles of resistance. On the one hand, it seems to suggest that the effort is doomed without broad social change. It is always with gentle irony that the novel presents the children’s “pretend revolution.” Also, Ammu’s act of non-identity is limited to the enclosures of social space enforced on elite women. In this way, the novel mocks its own aesthetic pretensions, and, by extension, we might take it as a lesson for the pretensions of postmodern critics who make grandiose claims that interventions in discourse lead to genuine social change. To have such pretensions is to ignore very real social contradictions, particularly the contradictions that paralyze members of the Indian elite in the novel. On the other hand, the novel simultaneously takes seriously the notion that fiction does play a role in the organization of social reality. The argument is made, in fact, that the vision of social change must be revised to account for ecological, feminist, and subaltern struggles. The novel may be read, then, as a commentary on the failure to act with an adequate understanding of the tensions and contradictions underlying the postcolonial crisis of capitalist patriarchy in India.

Despite the failures enumerated by the novel, it does allude to the small residual and emergent alternative forms of knowledge and interaction that survive on the margins of capitalist imperialism. These are by no means idealized forms, but patterns of interaction and knowledge

¹⁴ Aijaz Ahmad dismisses the romance between Ammu and Velutha as an evasion of genuine political engagement in its depiction of “the erotic as that private transgression through which one transcends public injuries.” He misses the point that the boundaries between public and private spheres are blurred in the History House, where the history of imperialism and private hierarchies of desire collide. The spider’s uncanny presence, both friendly and menacing can be read as a figure of negative dialectics, the absent presence of empire in daily life. See Aijaz Ahmad, “Reading Arundhati Roy Politically.” *Frontline* (8 August 1997): 103-108.

formation associated with the artisan-based and subsistence-based economies. In other words, it is within the economy of the fisher people, for example, or the innovative engagement of Velutha's labor, that the novel locates the development of knowledge, not geared toward extraction through the imposition of force, but rather in creative activity with a keen sense for rhythms and patterns of nature and the land. That is, these economies represent a different system of exchange, not based on a violently imposed system of equivalents, and thus prefigure an alternative organization of production. What comes to mind are the social movements of fisher people in Kerala that sprang up in the 1970s to protest factory fishing by foreign trawlers. Omvedt reports that "the agitation of the fishing communities against mechanized trawling in Kerala fought both Congress-controlled and CPI (M)-dominated state governments" (136). Furthermore, as women fishworkers met to discuss domestic violence, sexual assault, and labor issues during "the very real confrontation of the community with ecological devastation . . . the movement was pushed into gender and ecological issues that did not fit very well into the Marxist perspective existing in Kerala" (136, 205).

In the contemporary neo-liberal era depicted in the novel those alternatives exist but are barely visible. The novel's portrayal of the contemporary Ayemenem represents a place where people remain traumatized by the brutal oppressions of the past and one where caste violence, the exploitation of rural workers, and women's oppression have not been eliminated. The impact of privatization, IMF structural adjustment, and the whole host of market-based policies adopted by the Indian government after 1991, which constitute an even more intensive regime of accumulation and commodification, is evoked in the novel in the images of the river now dammed up with funding from the World Bank, and of the commodification of the History House into a global tourist site.¹⁵ Significantly, the area around the History House has been

¹⁵ The novel's references to neoliberalism reflect the dramatic turn in Indian economic policy taken in 1991, when, after a balance-of-payments crisis, it began to aggressively implement a neoliberal agenda. This agenda has included the typical range of policies associated with neoliberalism, such as broad liberalization of trade and foreign investment; reduction of corporate tax rates; privatization of state-run services; reduction of workers' rights; and cuts of public expenditures on health and education. India also sought a loan from the IMF and signed on to a Structural Adjustment Program, which has required, among other draconian measures, that the country adopt policies to boost its exports. As the redistributive role of the state has been downsized, there has been increasing inequality, as Achin Vanaik, writing in 2004, reports: "Never in the history of post-independence India has there ever been over a similar time span anywhere near as fast a rise in consumption by the top . . . (20 percent) as in the previous six years. But in this same period, the bottom 80 percent of rural India witnessed a consumption decline" (10). At the same time, corporate control of the country's wealth and resources has grown considerably, as Vandana Shiva has reported in her recent analysis of the disappearing communally-controlled or "commons" land and water, and its degradation as it is converted by corporate oligarchs to private wealth with the collusion of state officials, who rose to power through association with Hindutva. As she reports, "corporations such as Monsanto have manipulated the weakened governance systems to obtain markets for

reimagined as “God’s Own Country” and the house itself has been dubbed “Heritage House,” where “the Hotel People liked to tell their guests that the oldest of the wooden houses . . . had been the ancestral house of Comrade E. M. S. Namboodiripad, ‘Kerala’s Mao Tse-tung’ . . . The furniture and knickknacks that came with the house were on display. A reed umbrella, a wicker couch. A wooden dowry box. They were labeled with edifying placards that said *Traditional Kerala Umbrella* and *Traditional Bridal Dowry-box*” (120). The area’s radicalism and struggle are thus trivialized, and the local Kathakali stories are translated into so many pat, commodified stories.¹⁶ The novel ironically remarks that “the view from the hotel was beautiful . . . [around which was] built a tall wall to screen off the slum and prevent it from encroaching on Kari Saipu’s estate. There wasn’t much they could do about the smell” (119).

In the reading of *The God of Small Things* provided here, my aim has been to show the novel as an environmental feminist critique of imperialism. The snapshots of contemporary India reveal the devastation to the environment and subaltern lives in peripheral areas, made so by intensified exploitation under arguably a reinvented form of imperialism—neoliberal globalization. Some critics have implied that Arundhati Roy’s environmentalism represents a voice for neo-traditionalism, but I have argued elsewhere that it advances feminist social change that values emerging experiments in sustainable economic production coupled with social justice.¹⁷ That open-ended struggle is a subtext of her novel as well. In an infrequently cited essay, Edward Said argues that Frantz Fanon took from Lukács his notions of reification and the dialectical struggle against it, but the radicalism of both intellectuals is often neglected because it is assumed that they provide a complete roadmap to liberation, when in fact their work, and Adorno comes to mind here, implies “permanent dissonance”: “There is concurrence here between Fanon and [the] more . . . radical Lukács on the one hand, and between Lukács and Adorno on the other. The work of theory, criticism, demystification, deconsecration, and decentralization they imply is never finished” (451). Significantly, the novel is engaged in an open-ended

their genetically engineered seeds, as well as for intellectual property rights and patents to create monopolies. Water giants such as Suez and Vivendi have found opportunities through India’s new water policy, which promotes privatization; grain traders such as Cargill have tried to move into India’s food trade, threatening farmers’ livelihoods and the food security of the poor” (154). Roy has herself reported the destructive consequences of a neoliberal agenda to the environment, the rural and urban poor, especially in the drama that has unfolded around the battle over the Narmada River Project. See, especially, Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living*. Cambridge, MA: South End, 1999; and *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*. Cambridge, MA: South End, 2004.

¹⁶ See Bishnapriya Ghosh, *When Borne Across* for a discussion of the commodification of Roy and other contemporary Indian writing.

¹⁷ See Susan Comfort, “How to Tell a Story to Change the World: Arundhati Roy, Globalization and Environmental Feminism.” *Globalizing Dissent: Essays on Arundhati Roy*. Eds. Ranjan Ghosh & Antonia Navarro-Tejero. New York: Routledge, 2009: 118-142.

demystification, and it is from the relentless engagement of its negative dialectics of environmental feminism—the reconfigurations of history, the resistance to reification, as well as the experimentation with alternative forms of knowledge that valorize ecological and feminist practices—that the novel strives to resist mythologizing identity, nature, and history and thus demonstrates that praxis is possible even in a thoroughly commodified world.

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