Decentering Rushdie

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Given Arundhati Roy’s stature within today’s international movements against corporate globalization and naked imperialism, it is shocking to remember that her Booker Prize–winning novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), was initially met with a wave of criticism and even hostility from prominent sections of the Indian Left, particularly those associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Indian Communists emphatically and publicly denounced the novel for explicitly mocking E. M. S. Namboodiripad, the late CPI(M) leader, for depicting Communists as being unmindful of caste oppression, and for peddling “bourgeois decadence” through its representations of “sexual anarchy” (“EMS Attacks”).¹ Leading the charge against Roy, E. M. S. himself declared that the novel’s critique of Communism was central to why it was “welcomed by the captains of the industry of bourgeois literature in the world” (Jose). Similarly, then–Kerala Chief Minister E. K. Nayanar attributed the novel’s winning of the Booker Prize to its Western-oriented, “anti-Communist venom”

This chapter expands on my article “Beyond ‘Anticommunism.’”
(“Nayar Pours Scorn”). Indeed, Aijaz Ahmad’s article in the August 1997 issue of the CPI(M)-friendly Frontline magazine, by far the most nuanced of such critiques, had already taken Roy to task for reproducing the “hostility toward the Communist movement [that] is now fairly common among radical sections of the intelligentsia, in India and abroad” (“Reading” 103). Specifically, Ahmad criticized what he regarded as the conservative implications of the novel’s representation of sexuality “as the final realm of both Pleasure and of Truth” (104) and “a sufficient mode for overcoming real social oppressions” (107).

However, the post-Booker recognition of Roy’s political writing—beginning with “The Greater Common Good”—and her incessant defense of villagers and activists opposing the Narmada Valley Development Project, disrupted any assimilation of Roy into the category of the disengaged postcolonial writer. To their credit, the CPI(M) and the editors and columnists of Frontline quickly recognized the radicalism of Roy’s political essays despite their earlier criticisms of her novel; “The Greater Common Good,” in fact, first appeared in Frontline. The rest of the story is, I imagine, quite familiar to those following global leftist political discourse since the late 1990s. Fiercely critical of Western nations for corporate globalization and imperialist wars—but also of postcolonial states for their complicity in the neoliberal project—Roy has developed a unique perspective and emerged as one of the most prominent public intellectuals of the international Left in the first decade of the twenty-first century. What is perhaps most appealing about Roy’s political essays, besides their lyrical and confident style, is a theoretical and political framework flexible enough to allow her to comment insightfully on any range of issues, including women’s rights, environmentalism, globalization, war and resistance to occupation, caste and racial oppression, and democratic rights.

This chapter asserts that Roy’s novel and her political work, far from moving in divergent directions, are bound together by a political paradigm that is unmistakably progressive and leftist. While the genre of the essay allows this leftist voice to emerge more explicitly and directly than that of the novel, The God of Small Things allows for a criticism of the status quo that is as devastating as that of the essays—despite either the CPI(M)’s censure or the valorization and appropriation of the novel by the mainstream publishing and academic markets in the West. The God of Small Things, simply put, is an anti-authoritarian, antipatriarchal novel, construing a narrative of subaltern struggle and survival in postcolonial India. Like Roy’s essays, interviews, and speeches, the novel approaches the world from a perspective that illuminates the role that ordinary people
and “small” lives play in history and society, fighting against the attempts of official, “big” histories to suppress their voices. The CPI(M)-affiliated criticism—mired in a nondialectical critical methodology—cannot see this, as it assigns, a priori, a negative political value to Roy’s location (as an English-language writer), the novel’s reception (its popularity in the West), its explicit statements (criticism of the CPI(M)), and/or its themes (e.g., the liberatory potential of sexuality and desire). The subsequent celebration of Roy’s essays, indeed, implicitly employs the same method though with a different result: since the Frontline editors broadly agree with the explicit statements in the essays, they champion the texts and, once again, fail to analyze the political paradigms underlying them.

In order to properly assess postcolonial texts such as The God of Small Things, Marxist and/or political critics need to refute the tautological exercises that make sure writers have the “right” passport and home address, the “right” political affiliations, and the “right” level of skepticism about postmodern aesthetics. We need to develop, rather, a nuanced understanding of the relationship between location, ideology, and aesthetics in which the three categories are not conflated and the meaning of a given text is not automatically determined by one of them. In terms of Roy, for instance, this means recognizing some complexities, including that 1) the leftist essays and speeches are produced from the same elite location as the novel itself, 2) the appropriation of postcolonial novels in English into the global marketplace does not necessarily mean that each of these novels exhibits the values of that marketplace, and 3) not all writers who employ postmodern aesthetics (multivocal texts, nonlinear narratives, magical realism) necessarily replicate the antihistoricist values of postmodern epistemology. If we allow the narrative to breathe and speak its mind, as it were, it becomes clear that far from being a sign of a cosmopolitan-elite anticommunism, the criticism of the CPI(M) in the universe constructed by The God of Small Things is actually a marker of its leftist politics. The Marxist literary critic ought to recognize this and hold back from allowing her or his own position on the CPI(M) to overdetermine the analysis. I am not therefore discouraging questions about political ideology, such as “What do we make of Roy’s criticism of Indian Communism?” but arguing that they should not be allowed to overwhelm an analysis of the novel as a literary work.6

It is worth recognizing that the CPI(M)’s readings represent only one voice in a much larger chorus of critics and commentators who have also tended to read The God of Small Things as the fulfillment of the (postmodernist) ideological and aesthetic project launched by Salman Rushdie’s
Midnight’s Children (1980). In 1997, against the backdrop of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, the Western and Indian mainstream media placed Roy’s Booker alongside Rushdie’s, reading them as signs of India’s rising place in the post–Cold War world. Many scholars since then, though skeptical of the global marketing of Indian English writing, have paired Rushdie and Roy together as participants in a common, radical project: disrupting Orientalist and nationalist metanarratives; revealing the “hybridity” of postcolonial subjects and contexts; highlighting intra-national divisions of gender, sexuality, and class; and questioning classic nationalist and leftist discourses. The CPI(M) readings belong to a third group of readers who have associated The God of Small Things with today’s postmodern writing. In their view, such texts exhibit a cosmopolitan detachment from the nation as their “mastery over the current idiom of metropolitan meta-language of narrative ensures favorable reception in the global centers of publication and criticism” (M. Mukherjee, Perishable 179). Despite significant differences, then, these readers have arrived at a consensus: The God of Small Things ought to be read alongside novels such as Midnight’s Children because of demonstrable similarities in genre, form, cosmopolitan-elite location, and Western reception.

However, I suggest, The God of Small Things represents an exception to the contemporary Indian English novel and its postnational cosmopolitanism, hearkening back, instead, to the namak-halaal sensibilities and frameworks of the early postcolonial period. Though the novel is magical-realist text, its narrative strategies are directed against postmodernist epistemologies that emphasize the impossibility of constructing cohesive counternarratives of truth. The God of Small Things’s engagement with and sharp critique of postcolonial Indian modernity flow from a perspective and narrative practice that both mourns the historical, cultural, and geographical loss of indigenous spaces and imagines their recovery. As we have seen in other namak-halaal texts—such as Nayantara Sahgal’s nationalist and feminist critiques of Indian postcoloniality, Kamala Markandaya’s account of how transnational capitalism transforms subaltern lives and bodies in The Coffer Dams, and Anita Desai’s women-centered representations of family and culture in Clear Light of Day—their characterization, voicing, and plot demand that critiques of and solutions to postcolonial crises be formulated from within familial, social, and political contexts that are specifically marked as local and national. While The God of Small Things is similar to postnational novels, including Midnight’s Children and Vikram Chandra’s Red Earth and Pouring Rain, in its representation of Indian spaces as sites of suffering, despair, and loss, it does not
revert to tropes of migrancy and exile or modes of irony and cynicism in order to articulate realms of freedom. Rather, it joins earlier, namak-halaal texts in charting paths for the reclamation of national and local spaces, situating itself within the nation itself.

Furthermore, the subaltern-centered and leftist critique of postcoloniality in The God of Small Things also differentiates it from most Indian English novels, whether namak-halaal or otherwise. Most of these texts develop criticisms of postcolonial society and the ruling elites that maintain it, paying attention to gender, class, sexual, religious, caste, and national oppression, but they are often informed by fairly mainstream nationalist, traditionalist, and/or liberal ideologies. Roy’s novel, in contrast, not only portrays inequalities within the nation but also dismantles the entire edifice of elite-centered approaches to history-writing and storytelling. The God of Small Things’s narrative strategies allow for a “literature from below,” a recovery of small stories that opens spaces for both subaltern-centered critique and the agency of the oppressed themselves. The namak (“salt”) to which The God of Small Things is committed, therefore, is not the nation as such (e.g., The Day in Shadow) or the family (e.g., Clear Light of Day) but the marginalized and oppressed voices of history.

As in Bessie Head’s “The Wind and a Boy,” cited in the epigraph above, The God of Small Things insistently critiques a postcolonial capitalist modernity in which “progress” and “development” benefit elites while running roughshod over women, working people, and other oppressed groups. Indeed, Roy’s novel shares with a host of African texts of the 1960s and 1970s an interest in drawing attention to the subaltern victims of postcolonial modernity and retelling the story of the postcolonial from their vantage point. The narrator of “The Wind and a Boy” does not simply mourn the boy crushed by the truck but explicitly uses the tale to rewrite the reader’s understanding of modernity, capitalism, and power in postcolonial Botswana from a subaltern perspective: “It looked like being an ugly story with many decapitated bodies on the main road.”

The resolutions of nationalist, namak-halaal texts (e.g., the return to Gandhian values, the restoration of the family) and the escapes of postnational ones (e.g., the celebration of migrancy and the wit of the implied author) are unavailable to texts whose analyses begin with the everyday, public decapitation of subaltern bodies. And yet, in subaltern-centered Anglophone texts such as The God of Small Things, Aidoo’s “For Whom Things Did Not Change” (1972), Armah’s The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968), and Ngugi’s The Devil on the Cross (1977), the depiction of postcolonial brutality operates alongside a commitment to portraying
subaltern agency and resistance. By drawing out the processes by which
elite violence develops, and thereby rendering them historical, earthly,
and subject to change, they enable what literary critic Njabulo Ndebele
calls “the rediscovery of the ordinary.” More than most other postcolonial
Indian English novels, The God of Small Things charts out history’s sup-
pression of alternative stories while reconstructing narratives of resistance
that are grounded in subaltern-centered notions of truth and knowledge.9
Furthermore, as I illustrate in this chapter, a namak-halaal and subal-
tern-centered narrative is not incompatible with the development of postmod-
ern metafictional forms such as magical realism.

My reading of The God of Small Things thus takes up three related
tasks: 1) to argue that a subaltern-centered and leftist political paradigm
drives the novel’s political ideology and narrative strategies; 2) to contest,
in the process, methods of literary criticism that conflate location, ideology,
and aesthetics in pairing the novel with other post-Emergency texts; and 3)
to read the novel’s critique of Indian postcoloniality as an new example
of a namak-halaal cosmopolitanism. I take up these questions through an
investigation of the binary opposition of big things and small things, the
metaphorical pairing put forward by the novel itself as a hermeneutic. The
big/small dyad structures the text’s political content and perspective on
Communism; its strategies of plot, character, and voice; and its represen-
tations of nature and sexuality. Associated with caste, class, and gender
oppression, with nature, and with transgressive sexuality, the small rebels
against the big—the traditional laws of caste and sexuality, the forces of
capitalist modernity, and ruling parties such as the CPI(M) that, according
to the novel, make cynical use of subaltern suffering. At the same time, the
big/small paradigm eschews any easy valorization of resistance. The God
of Small Things offers narratives of failed rebellions and betrayals, forcing
its characters and implied audience to think critically about the condition
of subalternity and elite complicity in structures of power.

On the whole, I suggest, Roy’s big/small paradigm in this novel offers
a powerful lens for examining subaltern agency within a “dialectic of suf-
ferring and redemption” (Ndebele 54), guarding against either utopianism
or pessimism. While this paradigm is not a Marxist one, I am intrigued
by the ways in which the novel puts postmodern aesthetics in the service
of a radical, historicist epistemology. As Kalpana Wilson suggests in her
early critique of the CPI(M) readings, it would be a missed opportunity for
Marxist critics to “relinquish—or banish—the concerns which dominate
Roy’s book, all of which are essentially issues of power, to the domain of
the NGOs.”10
How the Big/Small Paradigm Works

The flexibility of the categories of “big things” and “small things” allows the novel to investigate different sets of power relations simultaneously, championing the voiceless and the marginalized against the forces of caste, class, gender, sexual, ethnic, and racial oppression. Furthermore, like the paradigm of “elite/subaltern” as defined by Ranajit Guha in the early volumes of Subaltern Studies, Roy’s big/small paradigm insists that characters that are small in some contexts might be big in others. The God of Small Things thus describes an intricate web of power in which oppressions overlap and reinforce one another. As the implied audience gradually comes to see, in addition, the various big/small pairings in the novel are not random but organized hierarchically, placing caste and class oppression at the center of postcolonial violence even while carefully investigating other sites of violence. At the novel’s very core, thus, is the story of Velutha, a Dalit carpenter and card-carrying Communist who is killed by police in his hometown of Ayemenem, in the southwestern state of Kerala, in December 1969. A brief discussion of the plot and narrative structure will help to illustrate both the complex, multiple oppressions that the novel describes and the construction of Velutha as the smallest of the small.

Velutha’s crime is that he dared to pursue a love affair with Ammu, whose upper-caste, Syrian-Christian family owns the pickle factory where he works and which also employs his father, Vellya Paapen. Velutha’s open defiance of caste, class, gender, and sexual restrictions cannot go unpunished in the world constructed by the novel, and Ammu’s mother, Mam-machi, and her grand-aunt, Baby Kochamamma, come together with the state in order to enforce hierarchies that are both age-old and completely modern. After Velutha is falsely condemned for kidnapping Rahel and Estha, Ammu’s seven-year-old twins with whom he has built a loving relationship, and for killing Sophie Mol, Ammu’s nine-year-old niece visiting from England who has died in a boating accident, his brilliant smile is smashed and inverted by six free-swinging cops in thick, hob-nailed boots. Velutha dies of his injuries in prison overnight, and the event completely shatters the lives of Ammu and her children. Indeed, the children have already been under tremendous emotional and psychological strain: Ammu, socially ostracized for her independent ways, often takes out her frustrations on her children, especially Rahel; Estha, unbeknownst to his family, has been molested by an Orangedrink Lemondrink Man at Abhi-lash Talkies; Estha and Rahel’s boating adventure to the History House has ended with Sophie Mol’s death. But, as we gradually learn, all of
this suffering pales in relation to what happens after Ammu and Velutha break the Love Laws. Once Ayemenem’s elites are finished with Velutha, they come after Ammu and the twins. Within two weeks, Estha is sent away to live with his father, Babu, the alcoholic husband whom Ammu had divorced when he tried to force her to sleep with his boss, the British owner of a multinational tea plantation in the northeastern state of Assam. Estha is completely traumatized and gradually stops speaking; he is separated from his mother, whom he never sees again, and torn away from Ayemen until 1993, the narrative present. Rahel also grows up without her mother. After Ammu’s affair with Velutha, her long record of rebellion and transgression—choosing her own husband from outside her religious, linguistic, and regional community, and then divorcing him—can no longer be tolerated. Sent away from Ayemenem a broken woman, Ammu dies prematurely and alone at the age of thirty-one. Rahel is described as lost and empty: expelled from her Christian school for “depravity,” she serves a long stint as an architecture student in Delhi, enters into and then leaves a loveless marriage in the United States, and is working at a gas station when news of Estha’s return to Ayemenem chases her home.

When the twins, personifications of Emptiness and Quietness, make their separate ways back to Ayemenem in June 1993—at age thirty-one—they are unable to even communicate with one another. Over the course of the novel, which shifts back and forth between June 1993 and various moments in December 1969, the third-person omniscient narrator pieces together the events of the past and its aftermath, frequently through the perspective of the self-reflexive, adult Rahel. The 1969 events emerge in a jumbled, nonlinear sequence, reflecting both the traumatized, scattered memory of the adult Rahel and the chaotic/creative reflections of the seven-year-old girl. But the 1993 events, though interspersed with the flashbacks to 1969, are related sequentially, emphasizing the centrality of Rahel’s elite voice and allowing us to gauge the impact of her memories on her actions. She and Estha finally end their estrangement and isolation by the end of the novel but in an unforeseen way, engaging in incestuous sex in their deceased mother’s old bed in a desperate attempt to find a lost unity in this symbolic womb, hoping to soothe the “hideous grief” that they feel (The God of Small Things 311).

Paradoxically, the fact that Velutha’s voice is not central to the narration of the story does not take away from the novel’s subaltern-centered politics. Certainly, the framing of the story through Rahel’s perspective in 1993 grants a certain priority to elite characters and Velutha appears to be only in the margins of the story. The initial foregrounding of Rahel’s
trauma and the suffering of Ammu and Estha first establishes them, not Velutha, as representatives of small things. It is only in chapter 8 that the audience is made aware that Velutha actually bears the greatest brunt of postcolonial violence, which forces us to rearrange our understanding of how the characters relate to one another and what sorts of agency they possess. Thus, the narrative constructs an implied audience that is unable to approach Velutha’s story except from a distance, slowly working through the trauma of Ammu’s family and discerning the various, overlapping sites of violence and brutality. Rather than producing an elite-centered narrative, however, this progression allows for a complex rendering of power relations in postcolonial society and a lesson in how subalternity is produced through the selective processes of storytelling.

As we learn the truth, that all of these stories of oppression are linked together by the way in which they relate to Velutha’s, we also learn that the dark cloud that hangs over Rahel’s head represents her guilt about her family’s complicity in Velutha’s death. Velutha is betrayed not only by those who have an interest in keeping him down—his bosses, the police—but also by intimates and allies such as Comrade Pillai (the local Communist leader), his father (who thought Velutha was getting too “uppity” for a Dalit), and Estha (who was told he had to choose between saving Velutha and saving his mother). Velutha is “abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by Man, by Woman, and [. . .] by the Children” (The God of Small Things 294). By representing the murder as the result of a collusion between classic “big things” (history, the state, tradition) and erstwhile “small things” that become “big things” in particular circumstances (Ammu, the twins, Comrade Pillai), the novel moves from a potentially static binary opposition to a dialectical one, constructing a complex hierarchy of perpetrators and victims that places Velutha at the center. By strategically delaying the implied audience’s knowledge of Velutha’s story and the betrayals of elites—we know what happens to them before we know what they do to Velutha—the novel draws its English-speaking and implicitly elite implied audience into a critical reflection about its own place in (postcolonial) relations of power. The novel does not merely recognize but thoroughly indict the “jungle-craft of gentility” that forces elites to look away from subaltern suffering (A. Ghosh, The Shadow Lines 134).

In showing how the early sections of the novel work to strategically marginalize Velutha, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the foregrounding of caste and class oppression does not mean the minimizing of gender oppression—even when the female characters turn out to be culpable elites—but the linking together of the categories of gender,
caste, and class. For instance, the first two chapters, though lengthy and detailed in describing the social, religious, gender, and sexual contexts of the characters’ lives, make only passing mention of Velutha. Within the first twenty pages, the implied audience is made aware that some secret story of brutality (“the Terror”) hangs over Ammu, Rahel, and Estha, but they themselves appear to be the greatest victims of this Terror in light of Ammu’s difficult past and the tragic drowning of Sophie Mol. Brief, scattered statements do foreshow Velutha’s story, but the focus remains on other characters. In chapter 1, for instance, Ammu says “I’ve killed him” after being questioned, harassed, and threatened by the police on the day after Velutha’s death (The God of Small Things). But Ammu’s visit to the station is portrayed mostly in terms of the harassment and powerlessness that she experiences there: in order to silence her, the policeman taps her breasts with his nightstick (“Tap, tap.”) and calls her a “veshya,” a word that makes Ammu cry but that she does not translate to her children (9–10). We later learn, of course, that this scene is the linchpin of Ammu’s betrayal of Velutha—if she had admitted to consensual sex and accepted the social stigma of being called a “loose woman,” he may have been exonerated. But at this moment, the text is focused on Ammu herself, and the episode is related as part of a larger narrative of the conjugal family’s suffering in light of gender/sexual bias. In chapter 2, similarly, Velutha is invoked in the description of Ammu’s “unsafe edge” as a multiply oppressed woman: “The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber [. . .] grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (43–44). But the text withholds knowledge of who exactly “the man” is and focuses on how Ammu is affected by her repeatedly frustrated attempts to break free from familial and social restrictions. After learning about Velutha’s death, we can put these scenes into their “proper” chronological contexts, as it were, and recognize the ghostly presence of Velutha in the early chapters. Nevertheless, orienting the story through the elite female characters has an important function. By suggesting that the sexual affair emerges as a rebellion against gender oppression, the novel is able to deepen our understanding of Velutha’s story, linking together gender, caste, and class rather than positioning them as oppositional to one another. By making the implied audience sympathetic to Ammu’s oppression as a woman, the text prepares us to empathize with Velutha and to reread his victimization with new eyes.

In this manner, the novel offers a map of diverse and linked social oppressions in postcolonial India and imagines characters that rebel
against them. But all of these rebels meet tragic ends. The antagonists of the novel who aid the march of tradition and history brook no disobedience; for every moment of pleasure they exact years of misery. In fact, by arranging the narrative in terms of a look back across decades of Indian postcoloniality, from the post–Cold War and neoliberal 1990s to the late-1960s contexts of emergent authoritarianism and resistance, *The God of Small Things* writes its story of power and powerlessness on a much larger, national canvas. The story of loss and sadness in the lives of the characters extends for decades, paralleling the long crises in the real and fictional India. The adult Rahel and the third-person narrator explicitly link the marginalization of the small with the devastation of capitalist modernity on Partitioned, postcolonial South Asia. As we learn early in the novel, “[i]n the country that [Rahel] came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening” (*The God of Small Things* 20), creating a maddening downward spiral in which each tale of terror is outstripped by the next one.¹⁴

The novel thus moves between two poles: it represents small things as being infinitely resilient, resisting all obstacles, but also depicts big things as overwhelming all acts of subaltern agency and resistance. Within this dynamic, the implied audience is encouraged to embrace the moments of pleasure and hope that are scattered throughout the text: its characters that refuse to succumb to restrictions on their agency, its dazzling and innovative use of language, its ability to describe both the destructiveness of World Bank loans and the seven-year-old children’s Love-in-Tokyo hairbands and Elvis-style hairdos. And yet the decisiveness with which rebellions fail raises question. Is this, after all, mainly a tale of suffering, of the indomitable structures of power?

The appearance of the big/small paradigm in “The Greater Common Good” gives some insight into how the paradigm works, maintaining a space for hope and agency without minimizing the long, wretched historical context that resistance must confront. Commenting on age-old debates between Nehruvian and Gandhian models of development, Roy calls for developing new ways of thinking:

> It’s possible that as a nation we’ve exhausted our quota of heroes for this century, but while we wait for the shiny new ones to come along, we have to limit the damage. We have to support our small heroes. (Of these we have many. Many.) We have to fight specific wars in specific ways. Who knows, perhaps that’s what the twenty-first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big
contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there’s a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Could it be? Could it possibly be? It sounds finger-licking good to me. (Roy, Cost 12)

A clear opposition is delineated here, with the big standing for the industrial, military, and political devastation of the twentieth century, the result of the failed, monolithic utopias of heroes with grandiose dreams, while the small, no less heroic, stands for multiplicity and specificity—for real solutions to real problems. The power of the big is not minimized, even as the ability of the small to stand up beyond its powerlessness is asserted. The small is also associated with femininity and playful excess. “Finger-licking good” can be read as both a euphemism for “fucking good” and an ironic invocation of Kentucky Fried Chicken’s motto, representing the big of monopoly capital. A small she-god is invoked in lieu of the predictable masculine, serious God. The “dismantling of the Big,” then, appears as both an exhortation for the present (“[w]e have to limit the damage”) and a future possibility (what the new century may have “in store” for us).

The vagueness of categories such as “big things,” however, presents a problem. The line “Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes” is clever rhetorically but raises more questions. Are all of these “bigs” the same? Are small countries more just and humane than big ones? Are ideologies of resistance also guilty of being “big ideologies”? Isn’t this the postmodernist/anarchist notion that all totalities are totalitarian—and a valorization of highly individualist and fragmented notions of resistance? In a more recent interview with the Indian magazine Tehelka, Roy articulates a much clearer statement about power and the state. When asked whether Maoist rebels, who had killed 55 policemen in a Bijapur attack that month, simply represented “the flip side of the State,” Roy responds:

How can the rebels be the flip side of the State? Would anybody say that those who fought against apartheid—however brutal their methods—were the flip side of the State? What about those who fought the French in Algeria? Or those who fought the Nazis? Or those who fought colonial regimes? Or those who are fighting the US occupation of Iraq? Are they the flip side of the State? This facile new report-driven “human rights” discourse, this meaningless condemnation game that we are all forced to play, makes politicians of us all and leaches the real politics out of everything. However pristine we would like to be, however hard we polish
Roy then goes on to explain how the violence and brutality of the government in Chattisgarh, the state where Bijapur is located, produced such limited options.

The basis of the argument is that “however brutal their methods,” the power that the small display in their resistance cannot simply be equated to that of the big; the “real politics” that create situations of oppression and suffering ought to be the basis of our understanding and assessments. Roy first makes her case through appeals to historical struggles, some of which (anti-apartheid, anti-Nazi) are likely to appeal to a more mainstream audience, and others to a specifically left and/or revolutionary-nationalist one (Algeria, Iraq). The selection of examples is interesting as it forces one to think critically about whether one agrees with the historical parallels—thereby rendering the very categorization of bigness and smallness as a matter of one’s politics and not self-evident truth. Marking all of these historical struggles as instances of the powerless fighting back, Roy suggests that to equate the violence of the big with the violence of the small would be utopian: to think that our high-minded thoughts (“our halos”) would be sufficient to make available “pristine choices” between the best types of resistance. As in the passage from “The Greater Common Good,” the solution is not to wait for “shiny new” godlike heroes to come along but to act now and “limit the damage.” There is no romanticization of the small here but a hard-nosed, practical allegiance with forces on the ground in all of their messiness.

When the Tehelka interviewer pushes further, asking how Roy might imagine these insurgents if they gained state power, she once again underlines the fact that since the Maoists and “various Marxist-Leninists groups are leading the fight against the immense injustice” in India—against the state, landlords, and armed militias—they deserve support. Yet, Roy explicitly criticizes the heroes of some of these groups, such as Mao, Stalin, and Pol Pot, and acknowledges that “[i]t may well be that when they come to power, they will, as you say, be brutal, unjust and autocratic, or even worse than the present government.” Since Roy is interested in questions of power and not party affiliations, she feels free to reply: “If they are [brutal, unjust, autocratic], we’ll have to fight them too. And most likely someone like myself will be the first person they’ll string up from the nearest tree—but right now, it is important to acknowledge that they are bearing the brunt of being at the forefront of resistance.” The fact of resisting
landlordism and state oppression gives the resistance group credibility, at
least for the moment. And yet this is not exactly “solidarity before criti-
cism,” in the sense that Roy makes her disagreements quite plain.

Roy’s *Tehelka* interview thus augments and updates the paradigm of
power as depicted in the earlier passage in two important ways. First, it
limits the open-ended nature of the categories of “big things” and “small
things,” distinguishing between different positions of power and power-
lessness, defending a mass movement of the oppressed that seeks transfor-
mation, and refusing to write it off as being always already the “flip side
of the state.” At the same time, this support for resistance remains critical,
aware of the possibility that rebellions for change can turn oppressive, that
the small can become the big. In this interview, historical contexts and the
democratic content of movements become more important than form (big,
small). *The God of Small Things*, similarly, does not simply lay out a list of
bigs and smalls but presents varieties of power and powerlessness. But this
recognition of complexity does not take it away from its central task: to
tell the truth about subaltern oppression.

**The Dialectic of Suffering and Redemption**

Roy’s novel and her essays do not simply describe the opposition of big
things and small things in a static way but offer a clear dynamic: while
small stories can and should be recovered, they are not sufficiently strong
to withstand and magically overcome the extreme violence of the big. At
best, the subaltern testimony that is produced by *The God of Small Things*
achieves, as I have mentioned above, what Ndebele calls the “rediscover-
ey of the ordinary.” Ndebele puts forth a representational strategy that—
like Gayatri Spivak’s criticism of the search for “authentic” subaltern
voices—avoids the “literature of the spectacle” but calls for representing
the “dialectic of suffering and redemption” that makes up the everyday
life of oppressed groups (54). Ndebele, however, wrestles with a ques-
tion that is different from the one posed by Spivak: he is more concerned
with gauging the paradigm of agency and structure through which a given
writer seeks to represent the subaltern, not whether such a representation
is possible. Keeping the extratextual subaltern referent and the struggle in
which s/he participates clearly in view, Ndebele calls for making the “ordi-
nary daily lives of people” the direct focus of representation because the
ordinary “constitutes the active social consciousness of people” and is the
basis on which a new consciousness can grow (55). In Velutha’s love for
his carpentry amidst his exploitation by his boss, for instance, we see a perfect correspondence with the character of the miner in South African writer Joel Matlou’s “Man Against Himself,” in whom, according to Ndebele, “[t]he necessary vilification of exploitation [is] separated from the human triumph associated with work [... ] which constitutes a positive value for the future” (54).

In Roy’s paradigm of big things and small things, therefore, no act of rebellious agency can exist that is not circumscribed by forces of oppression, but no oppression exists that cannot be challenged, that will simply stamp out all traces of the small. Recovering the small, then, is thus an active process of reconstructing subaltern narratives against the grain of the state and its accomplice, history, in whatever way possible. As such, Roy’s fictional and nonfictional narratives take up the task of retrieving alternative stories. Against the histories and actions of states and ruling elites, Roy seeks to recover the stories of those who, like Velutha, are forced to wipe away even the traces of their own presence. When Ammu and Velutha see one another as sexual beings for the first time, the intense personal moment is described as a historiographical act, allowing mere individuals to rewrite the past and dream alternative futures: “Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off guard” (The God of Small Things 167). But agency is always delimited in this novel, and the transgressive gaze lasts only a moment: “History’s fiends returned to claim them. To re-wrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. Where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (168). The loopholes of history through which this cross-caste love has escaped are firmly closed by the end: the beating of Velutha takes place in the History House with the twins as a live audience. They witness “a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions [... ] of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly. It was human history, masquerading as God’s Purpose, revealing herself to an under-age audience. [... ] History in live performance” (The God of Small Things 292–93). The staccato produced by short, one-word sentences provides a soundtrack to the passage’s content, in which the police, too, are no longer individuals but performers in a scene whose causes are effects long predetermined. History gets the last word. Period.

Is this, then, a Foucauldian or Althusserian model of the impossibility of agency and resistance in a world fully dominated by the powerful? Not quite. An important aspect of Roy’s paradigm is that despite its construction of history as a suffocating tale that only serves the interests of the
powerful, it does not sit easily with postmodernist rejections of historicity. The novel’s epigraph, quoting John Berger, reads, “[n]ever again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one”; certainly, this seems to simply repeat the Lyotardian mantra of being suspicious of all meta-narratives. But, like Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990)—the Rushdie novel I consider to be least interested in rejecting narrativity and truth-claims—Roy’s text is not simply about the power of storytelling in the abstract but about the need to tell the stories of the small. The novel has a definite truth that it seeks to divulge, a *telos* toward which it leads, and its refusal to discount narrativity itself opens the possibility for a subaltern-centered history. What postmodernism sometimes doesn’t realize is that there are many ways to skin a metanarrative; Roy writes more in the tradition of Howard Zinn than of Jean Baudrilliard. While Roy certainly exhibits what might be called a postmodernist style (highlighting disjointed narrative streams, fragmented subjects, hybrid literary forms), this needs to be distinguished from her fundamentally anti-postmodernist models of knowledge as expressed in the novel’s centering of “all those dispossessed of an identity or a speaking voice” (A. Singh 133).

In order to articulate this voice, Roy embeds the recovery of small voices against big institutions within the novel’s processes of telling and the audience’s experience of reading. The blueprint for what the text aims to do is cleverly offered within chapter 2, amidst a passing comment about caste oppression in Kerala that is symbolically rich in describing the novel’s tasks. Using the metaphor of footprints, *The God of Small Things* describes how the big institutions of caste, church, and state joined hands to render Dalits invisible and untouchable. The third-person narrator explains that Dalits “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” (*The God of Small Things* 71). After independence in 1947, however, Paravans who had become Christians under the British in a failed effort to escape the caste system found that they “were not entitled to any government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates because officially [. . . ] they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprints at all” (71).15 This might look, again, like a narrative about the supremacy of the big. But the placement of this historical note, appearing as we are first introduced to the rebellious, intelligent Velutha, reveals that its purpose is not just to mourn the past but to set the stage for the struggles of the present and the future.
The narrative does not end, therefore, at the point of history’s annihilation of Dalit identity, symbolically carried out by the Dalit’s own hand (and replicated, in Velutha’s story, by his own father’s betrayal). Much like Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, who declares, “[I] did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility” (7), the novel attempts to subvert the silencing of the subaltern by inscribing the small with the power of omniscience and omnipresence. The God of Small Things can now be read as a text that sets as its political and aesthetic task the retracing of the Dalit’s footsteps by exposing how they were wiped away. The role of the narrator and historian, therefore, becomes like that of an archaeologist: to put together “[l]ittle events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly, they become the bleached bones of a story” (The God of Small Things 32). And the complex narrative pattern demands that the reader participate in a similar project when putting together the story of Velutha as refracted through Rahel and other narrators.

The gradual emergence of Velutha as the central figure of the novel fully draws the implied audience into the narrative project of recovering small stories. “Things can change in a day,” the narrative warns us at the end of chapter 7, foreshadowing the history-defying gaze of Velutha and Ammu in chapter 8. But what changes is not only on the level of plot but on the level of our understanding of what kind of story this is, one in which Velutha is no longer marginal but shown to be marginalized, no longer a minor character but the central one. The God of Small Things achieves, through a postmodern aesthetic, the same political and historiographical goals as Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958) does through its stunning final paragraph, in which the implied author ironically takes up the voice of a colonial officer and considers how the entire story of Okonkwo, the subject of the novel, might fit into one paragraph in a book he would write. Through this paragraph, and indeed the final chapter as a whole, Things Fall Apart invokes the marginalization of African stories by European historiography only to turn the tables on it, reducing this officer’s story to an ironic footnote. On the narrative level, the unexpected focalization of the narrative through the eyes of the colonial officer at the end of a novel that had strategically given Europeans no interiority whatsoever mimics and calls attention to the historical and historiographical disjuncture caused by colonialism. Both Things Fall Apart and The God of Small Things highlight the truth of marginalization through the processes of storytelling, but the difference is that in the latter novel, the implied audience remains in the dark for much longer, forcing a lengthier process of rethinking.
After chapter 8, the novel places Velutha himself at the center of the narrative project of recovering the small, as he is rewritten as a storyteller and a nurturer of small tales whose task of recovery mirrors and completes the novel’s own. From the descendant of backwards-walking, footprint-sweeping Dalits, he later becomes symbolically associated with the one-armed man of Ammu’s dreamworld who “left no footprints on the shore” (*The God of Small Things* 208), who is the God of Small Things and the Keeper of Dreams. Leaving “no footprints in the sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors” (250), Velutha learns how to draw power from his smallness. In reflecting on how well Velutha would play with her and the other children, Rahel says that Velutha “[i]nstinctively colluded in the conspiracy of [. . .] fiction, taking care not to decimate it with adult carelessness [. . .]. It is after all so easy to shatter a story. [. . .] To let it be, to travel with it, as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do” (181). In this manner, Velutha is represented as the antithesis of the state and of history, the artist and storyteller who produces and provides shelter for alternative stories and histories.

The narrative process, in this manner, renders the novel as both *namak-halaal* and subaltern-centered. The distance that the text initially creates between the audience and Velutha heightens an awareness of the difference between its own identity and that of the Dalit character. Like Sanad’s frustrating experience with the beggar girl in *A Time to be Happy*, as discussed in the second chapter, it highlights the difficulties of communication across rigid social barriers. This structure develops the novel’s *namak-halaal* perspective: as Rahel, the central cosmopolitan-elite figure, takes responsibility for reconstructing the small, suppressed tale of Velutha’s murder, the narrative demands that the (cosmopolitan-elite) reader, too, engage with the problems of power and subalternity. But by giving importance to the adult Rahel’s perspective and tying the implied audience to her sensibilities, *The God of Small Things* allows for a new possibility: elite characters who reflect upon and become aware of their complicity might develop empathy and even solidarity with subaltern figures, becoming vehicles for the recovery of subaltern stories. For what is ultimately distinctive about Rahel, Ammu, and Estha is that they are capable of recognizing their role in creating the Terror; they mourn for Velutha from the depths of their bodies and minds.

Ammu, for example, is so attuned to how the big/small dynamic operates that she realizes the loss that she will experience from loving Velutha even before it happens. On the very day that Sophie Mol arrives, the day when Ammu and Velutha recognize their mutual attraction to each other’s
beauty, Ammu takes an afternoon nap in which she dreams of a one-armed man unsuccessfully trying to make love to her, the figure later revealed to be the socially handicapped Velutha. Awakened by her twins, who mistakenly think that she is having a nightmare, Ammu lets them play with the stretch marks scarring her body from their birth, reminding us both of the organic unity of their bodies and the pain that their birth caused to her. Ammu then sees her body in the mirror, admiring herself through the eyes of one who is desired—but then she breaks down, weeping for herself and her children. Vacillating, Ammu forbids Rahel from playing with Velutha and warns her not to get too close to him. But they are all linked to Velutha, bodily and mentally. In the same bedroom twenty-three years later, the organic unity of the four bodies is once again reenacted when the twins sleep together. Rahel, simultaneously performing the roles of herself and her mother, attracts to herself Estha through the recitation of his childhood nickname through lips that, to Estha, seem remarkably like their mother’s. It is after this episode, deep into the novel in chapter 20, that the narrator reveals how Ammu had tucked Rahel in bed that night of Sophie Mol’s arrival, making up for their fight that day over Velutha and revealing that she “[a]ched for him with the whole of her biology” (312). The spectral reunification of Rahel, Estha, Ammu, and Velutha—the virtual “family” that could never unite in real life—is grafted into the bodies and minds of Rahel and Estha as they continue the rebellious acts that have brought them both misery and joy.

In this manner, Rahel’s recognition of her potential complicity in killing Velutha becomes as important as her telling the story of the murder; she plays a central role in the novel’s task of writing a subaltern-centered counternarrative to the story of postcolonial modernity. Allied with Velutha despite their betrayal of him, she, Estha, and their mother are shaped by the tragedy and challenge his silencing. As the most developed characters, these figures, along with Velutha, represent the sort of complex interaction of suffering and redemption called for by Ndebele.

“Naaley. Tomorrow.”

An understanding of the dialectic of suffering and redemption as it operates in Roy allows for a more comprehensive reading of sexuality in the novel—a theme that is central to the CPI(M) and Frontline critiques of The God of Small Things as a bourgeois novel. In his review essay, Aijaz Ahmad takes only one aspect of this dialectic at a time, failing to see how
they form a whole. First, as we have seen, he criticizes the “conventional”
treatment of sexuality in the novel which, like much European-bourgeois
fiction, sees “sexuality as the final realm of both Pleasure and of Truth”
(“Reading” 104). Undoubtedly, the novel places a high premium on break-
ing the taboos of cross-caste sexuality and incest, and it is nothing new to
use the space of the erotic in order to represent a way to overcome soci-
etal grievances (105). Ahmad argues, next, that the satisfaction with the
novel among readers of contemporary fiction arises from the fact that its
double ending—involving the closure of both the frame narrative (Rahel
and Estha’s incest) and the core story (Velutha and Ammu’s lovemaking)—
provides both the “tragic” and “triumphalist” modes of the classic story
of the individual facing “intractable social conflicts” (105). The endings
invoke, on the one hand, a narrative in which the state and history are
seen as monolithic and invincible (the “tragic” mode) and, on the other,
one in which human choice—through sexuality—is represented as being
able to transcend the injustices of history (the “triumphalist” mode). For
Ahmad, representing sexuality as the ultimate act of resistance against the
state—whether in the triumphalist or tragic modes—is a failure not only
on the level of political ideology, but also of realism.

The implication that Roy tries to maintain a hold on both tragic and
triumphalist narratives, however, ignores the basic dynamic of big things
and small things that structures Roy’s novel. In fact, Roy’s double resolu-
tion of the plot with two irreconcilable and self-divided narrative strands is
an attempt to portray the contradictory tragedy-within-triumph that con-
stitutes ordinary life. The novel succeeds in its project precisely because it
portrays the inability of sexuality to smooth over the oppression of the sub-
altern. Ahmad correctly reads the novel as simultaneously valorizing sexu-
ality and lamenting its futility against the state and the Love Laws—but
depicting the tension between the two narratives in this way is precisely the
space within which the novel does its ideological work. Ahmad’s charge of
“having it both ways,” in this reading, loses its force since it becomes more
of a description of the novel’s project rather than a critical analysis of it.

Brinda Bose’s postmodernist critique of Ahmad’s reading fails, para-
doxically enough, along the same lines. Bose also sees the novel as privileg-
ing sexuality and the erotic but misses the fact that these are not necessarily
signifiers of emancipatory spaces. Whereas Ahmad decires the way that
“resistance can only be individual and fragile” in the novel, and that “the
personal is the only arena of the political” (“Reading” 108), Bose presents
a diametrically opposite view, with appropriate markers of her apparently
hostile position to Marxism in general and Ahmad in particular:
Roy takes on the histories that perpetuate [oppressive Love] Laws, and to read her novel politically [referring to the title of Ahmad’s piece] one may need to accept that there are certain kinds of politics that have more to do with interpersonal relations than with grand revolutions, that the most personal dilemmas can also become public causes, that erotics can also be a politics. (B. Bose 68; original italics)

Bose’s opposition of “interpersonal relations” to “grand revolutions” is an attempt to mirror the big/small opposition of Roy, with Ahmad’s Marxist belief in social revolution standing in as the “big” that displaces “erotics,” the “small.” Comparing *The God of Small Things* to Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Bose argues that the politics of the novel lies precisely in “the subversion of this shame and defeat through the valorization of erotic desire” (B. Bose 70). But by prioritizing individual desire and action in this way and seeing individual and private action as the essence of women’s resistance (68), Bose shortens the scope of her own feminist project—and misses the novel’s larger, structural critique of women’s oppression and its relationship to class divisions and modernity itself. Although Bose’s reading is explicitly opposed to Ahmad’s, both share the sense that the novel’s tragedy is ultimately subsumed by its protagonists’ erotic agency. Bose attempts to read Roy as performing a postmodernist subversion of social restrictions through sexuality; Ahmad critiques this very use of sexuality, which he sees as a classic trope in twentieth-century literature in English.

While these critics recognize important aspects of the novel’s representation of sexuality, they each overestimate its place in determining the novel’s politics. First, sexuality is not marked as “the real zone of rebellion and Truth” in the novel (A. Ahmad, “Reading” 108), because it is clearly not the only or even the most important site at which the text attempts to overcome the gap between the oppressed individual and society. Velutha’s relationship with Ammu is explosive because it is the culmination of a long list of the proud Dalit’s transgressions of class, caste, and sexual boundaries. Velutha’s class mobility through carpentry, his membership in the union and the Community Party, his physical, Touching relationship with the children of his boss’s family, and his direct, confident attitude have already placed him in a precarious position by the time he and Ammu make love. As we have seen, Ammu’s attraction for Velutha, too, emerges out of her own experience of rebellion. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Comrade Pillai, unskilled, upper-caste workers, and even Vellya Paapen are so eager to make the affair an occasion for a history lesson
precisely because Velutha and Ammu both have a long record of flouting the rules. On the flip side, sexuality is not always portrayed as healthy or positive. Sexuality can be abusive (Estha’s being forced to masturbate the Lemondrink Orangedrink Man), empty (Rahel’s relations with her ex-husband), and predatory (the attempt by Ammu’s ex-husband’s English boss to sexually abuse her). These negative portrayals of sexuality in the novel are as fundamental to its larger meaning as the allegedly positive/transgressive moments of incest and cross-caste sexuality. Estha’s silence and shame about his encounter in the hallway of Abhilash Talkies, for instance, foreshadows both his shame for betraying Velutha and the long silence that follows. Sexuality in the novel, then, is sometimes aligned with the small and sometimes with the big and needs to be analyzed in its given context. From this point of view, Velutha’s rendezvous with Ammu is important because it furthers the novel’s ideological task, to portray hope-within-oppression and, through this portrayal, to locate the novel as the gatherer of alternative, small stories.

In this light, it is not that erotics “is” the politics of the novel or that it represents a postmodernist sign for the viability of “alternative revolutions” (B. Bose 65), but that it is the site at which the oppression of postcolonial modernity is most clearly expressed, the material ground upon which the characters of the novel feel the brunt of powerful institutions. By drawing out the real economic and social relations between the different characters in the novel and, in effect, the “truth” of social oppression, Roy “comes down squarely—if perhaps unconsciously—in favor of a materialist” reading of the questions of gender and caste, as opposed to a postmodernist rejection of structured hierarchies, subjectivities, and material relations (Kalpana Wilson). Roy’s novel, therefore, needs to be seen in light of what the big/small paradigm accomplishes, and what it does not. As a rejection of the idea that representation, being impossible, is a site of violence and that all historiography is futile, the big/small paradigm allows for the building of a counternarrative centered on Velutha. Its power lies in the process by which it reads against the grain of history, exposing the processes of erasure that it employs, and reconstructing an alternative. However, while the big and the small are dialectically related on the level of character and narrative—the two categories shape and limit one another—that dynamic stops at a particular point: it does not imagine a resistance that will lead to a fundamental transformation. By the novel’s own political logic, therefore, transgressive sexuality is not depicted as providing a final answer—and no other mode of resistance can take its place. Every act of subaltern agency is circumscribed within a system of domination such
that Roy is able to avoid the pitfalls of uncritical valorization and/or victimization of the subaltern.

It is within the simultaneous telling and retelling of the story through the crossing narratives of 1969 and 1993 that sexuality emerges as—at once—a powerful and futile act of resistance by the powerless, a balm for soothing the social wounds inflicted on the central characters as well as the immediate cause of Velutha’s death. On the one hand, the withholding of the details of the affair and the Terror it unleashes transmits a sense of unease and foreboding; on the other, it allows the coexistence of an entirely opposite dynamic, by which the impact of the Terror is lessened. The more dramatic aspects of the story—Velutha’s murder, Ammu’s death—pass quickly; the final chapters present the (troubling) resolution of Rahel’s Emptiness and Estha’s Quietness and the story of Ammu and Velutha’s lovemaking. This juxtaposition, concluding with the chronologically earlier scene, allows Roy to rediscover the ordinary, the everyday resilience of popular life that cannot be completely crushed by the big—even as the “happy” ending heightens the sense of what was lost. The move is quite similar to the ending of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), when the moment of Nell’s realization of Sula’s value is also the moment of her deepest mourning, of “circles and circles of sorrow” (174). Rather than seeing happiness-through-erotics as the transgressive (and thus, celebratory) moment in the novel, one can read the glimmer of hope as being drenched in the “aura of defeat” (Truax). Alice Truax’s rendition of the double movement in the novel is as lyrical as it is accurate: “By now we know what horrors await these characters, but we have also learned, like Estha, to take what we can get. And so we hold onto this [final] vision of happiness, this precious scrap of plunder, even as the novel’s waters close over our heads.”

The novel’s association of Velutha with the one-armed man, the God of Small Things of Ammu’s dream, reveals the contours of Roy’s complex representational strategy. He is the true lover and seer—only he can see the shadows and the light—but he “can only do one thing at a time” (*The God of Small Things* 205). His handicap and his forbidden love preordain his defeat—“If he touched her he couldn’t talk to her, if he loved her he couldn’t leave, if he spoke he couldn’t listen, if he fought he couldn’t win” (207, original emphasis). At the same time, the “if” statements allow for choices and possibilities (B. Bose 70) that are just as important to the novel’s politics as the finality of defeat.

*The God of Small Things* forces the reader to find hope for the small in the midst of an invincible big that has historically never ceased to win—and yet to take that hope not as a romanticization of subaltern resistance.
but merely as a possibility. The same idea is encapsulated in the title of Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*; like the novel itself, the title clearly emphasizes the absence of “the beautiful ones” amidst the rot and corruption of postcolonial Ghana, but allows some space for future hope with the fragile “yet.” Neil Lazarus’s characterization of the novel as portraying Antonio Gramsci’s famous maxim—“pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”—is apt (*Resistance* 46), since it encapsulates the two main aspects of the novel’s ideological universe. “The man,” the unnamed protagonist of the novel, is rewarded for steadfastly holding to hope amidst the rot, but never forgets that a new future is only a possibility (Armah 159–60). To say that Velutha is like Karna, the mythological, lower-caste hero from the epic *Mahabharata*, “[i]n [whose] abject defeat lies his supreme triumph” (*The God of Small Things* 220), is not to read the novel as being “triumphalist,” but to see it as maintaining the necessary “optimism of the will” through which subalterns can imagine a different, more egalitarian world.

The final chapter, describing Velutha’s tryst with Ammu and with destiny, reveals sexuality to be the novel’s ultimate site for representing redemption-amidst-suffering. As Velutha floats on his back in the Meenachal, wondering whether Ammu will come to meet him, the narrator poses a counterfactual question to Velutha that is marked as being unanswerable: “Had he known that he was about to enter a tunnel whose only egress was his own annihilation, would he have turned away?” (*The God of Small Things* 315). Produced at the intersection of the diachronic and synchronic narratives—the 1993 thread has just ended but the 1969 tale, in effect, has only begun—this self-question forces the reader to create a space for agency even when its consequences are already known. Velutha senses where things may go (“I could lose everything. My job. My family. My livelihood. Everything” [316]) and the narrator spells it out: “The cost of living climbed to unaffordable heights,” including two lives, “two children’s childhood,” and “a history lesson for future offenders” (318). Velutha and Ammu teeter on the precipice between recognition of the gap between the big and the small, made visible by their actions. Immediately after their liaison, Velutha senses both doom and elation: “[T]he terror seeped back into him. At what he had done. At what he knew he would do again. And again” (319). Ammu feels the euphoria of a “small, sunny meadow” and “blue butterflies” on her road, but “[b]eyond it, an abyss” (319). Fearful of history and knowing that they have no future, the two lovers try to “[s]tick to the Small Things [ant-bites, caterpillars, a ‘particularly devout praying mantis,’ and a spider (who outlives Velutha)]” (320).
The force of Ammu’s (and the novel’s) final line—“Naaley. Tomorrow” (321)—comes from its confident gesture toward a future time of pleasure and hope even when, as the narrator and audience know and the characters suspect, such a future is nonexistent. The subsequent tension, evoking suffering and redemption simultaneously, turns the novel away from both a mere valorization of the erotic (love conquers all) and a fatalistic erasure of subaltern agency (love is futile under oppression). Like the word “yet” in Armah’s title, “tomorrow” signifies a self-consciously utopian gesture toward the future, one that is already circumscribed by the oppression of the present, but that gives hope (here, represented by sexual pleasure) to the protagonists. Since the novel always represents human agency as circumscribed by a hostile history, it can engage in a celebration of human resiliency without exaggerating its importance.

Velutha’s ability to realize the limits of his subjectivity is thus the paradoxical height of that celebration. When Velutha is led to his destruction, we are told, it is like history “walking the dog” (The God of Small Things 272). But it is Velutha, not only the narrator, who sees this, as the narrative flits back and forth between a third-person omniscient perspective and a free indirect style that moves the audience within Velutha’s consciousness. Marching toward sexual fulfillment is constructed as being the same as marching toward death, and Velutha is depicted as knowing this: he “felt that his sense had been honed and heightened. As though everything around him had been flattened into a neat illustration” (270). Amidst the whirlwind of thoughts in Velutha’s head, his engineer’s mind turns his problem into a machine drawing with an instructional manual telling him exactly what to do (269–70). Like Bashiam, the Adivasi engineer who decides to risk his life to save Europeans, Indians, and indigenous peoples from the floods in Markandaya’s The Coffer Dams, like “the man” who decides to risk “going home” in Armah rather than becoming a recluse like his Teacher, the certainty of annihilation by the big makes Velutha extremely confident in choosing his way. Indeed, as Lazarus writes about Armah’s novel, “that way, and that way alone, lies freedom” (Resistance 79).

The Postcolonial Pastoral

The rendezvous between Velutha and Ammu takes place at the bank of the Meenachal, underlining the association of the natural environment to “small things” throughout the novel. Velutha and the river are linked together powerfully, and the latter adds a spatial dimension to Velutha’s
acts of resistance on the level of character and plot. The river offers a rich resource for Velutha where he can replenish his strength and challenge the powers that be; indeed, only he can navigate its feisty currents, find the hidden paths and trails in the woods around it, and bring in the lumber that drives his livelihood. More broadly, Velutha is physically marked with symbols of nature; he carries on his back a light-brown, leaf-shaped birthmark, a Lucky Leaf that made the monsoons come on time (*The God of Small Things* 70). It is such associations, however, that have fueled readings of Velutha as a romanticized and dehistoricized figure, turning him into a “noble savage” (D. Anand 102). One of the most cited passages in such readings comes from the last chapter. As Ammu waits on the bank of the river and sees Velutha approach her for their initial, unplanned rendezvous, she sees that “the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it” (*The God of Small Things* 316). One can see why this representation of Velutha, locked into Ammu’s admiring gaze, is offered as proof of the novel’s othering of Velutha. Depicting the Dalit as a transcendental figure of nature appears to give him praise but actually marginalizes and appropriates him. The subaltern is cast as more elemental and earthy, while the elite character—the subject of the passage—watches and learns.

Viewed through the rubric of the big/small paradigm, however, Velutha’s symbolic association with the natural environment is transformed from a romanticized one to a sharp, anti-imperialist reclamation of local and national spaces. The critique of capitalist modernity in Roy’s novel often develops through representations of a deteriorating nature; the possibility of transforming that modernity, likewise, is projected through (lost scenes of) lush, natural beauty that are, crucially, linked to (the loss of) Velutha himself. In their discussions of the representations of land and nature by colonized/postcolonial artists, Rob Nixon and Edward Said point to the radicalism inherent in the imaginative efforts to reclaim lost spaces—eschewing easy dismissals of such representations as apolitical or escapist. Indeed, it is through such representations that *The God of Small Things* achieves its namak-halaal perspective, locating its resistance to postcolonial modernity within local and national spaces.

In an insightful essay on Roy’s novel, Jennifer Herman brings together Nixon’s category of the “postcolonial pastoral” with Said’s rereading of Irish Romanticism in “Yeats and Decolonization,” arguing that Roy’s novel “offers an anti-colonial postcolonial pastoral that overtly critiques Western processes of globalization and development, as well as Indian social class and caste systems” (4). Nixon suggests that unlike the Eng-
lish pastoral, whose dehistoricizing effort is to produce “the nation as garden idyll into which neither labor nor violence intrudes,” the “postcolonial pastoral” actually “refracts an idealized nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies” (238–99). Postcolonial representations thus (re)infuse nature with politics and history. While not all postcolonial texts might be as explicitly political in their representations of nature, Roy’s is an example of the postcolonial pastoral because it captures what Said describes as “the primacy of the geographic element” in the anti-imperialist imagination (Herman 3; Said, “Yeats” 225). In Said’s words, employing the first-person plural as a marker of his identity as a colonized Palestinian, “[O]ur space at home in the peripheries has been usurped and put to use by outsiders for their purpose. It is therefore necessary to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a third nature, not pristine and pre-historical [. . .] but deriving from the deprivations of the present” (“Yeats” 226). For Said, reclaiming “home” through nature in the context of colonialism is not necessarily romanticist in an antihistoricist way nor xenophobic and nationalist, provided that it reimagines home and self as a grappling with and an overcoming of colonial “deprivations” generated by its spatial dominance. In the postcolonial context and subaltern-centered perspective of The God of Small Things, Said’s discussion of colonial writing can be further expanded. Postcolonial “deprivations” are caused by both the imperialist West and the elites who run the nation-state; the “outsiders” are non-Indians but also upper-class, upper-caste, and/or male Indians; the “home” that is constructed around Velutha allows in sympathetic elites (Ammu, the children) but is also marked as separate from them.

As Herman and others have noted, the novel’s contrasting representations of the Meenachal River in the 1960s and the 1990s explicitly mark the third-person narrator’s critique of capitalist modernity—and open up a “third nature” that is beyond romanticism (the triumphalist mode) and despair (the tragic mode). The novel opens with a description of what the June monsoon usually means in Ayemenem, with the river extending into the streets as “[b]oats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways” (The God of Small Things 3). “Boundaries blur” everywhere, as “pepper vines snake up electric poles” (3). The passage celebrates the encroachment of nature into the signs of modern, compartmentalized life: the river in the streets, the boats in the bazaar, fish in the potholes, vines on electric poles. At the end of chapter 4, as the young twins lie together in bed in the 1960s, they dream of “their river” in lyrical and romantic language—with swaying coconut

[217]
trees, with warm water with a texture like “rippled silk,” containing a “yellow, broken moon” (116–17).

But the text opens chapter 5 with view of the river in the 1990s, in which the Meenachal greets Rahel with

a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed [. . .]

Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby [. . .]. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river.

Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water [. . .]

Once it had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. [. . .] Bright plastic bags flew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying flowers. (118–19)

The transformation of the mighty river to a “swollen drain” is clearly tied to the economic and political priorities of capitalist modernity. No longer a vessel of life, the river has been reduced to a site of death and devastation by the greed of agribusiness. “Bright plastic bags,” the corpses of commodity culture, adorn the river instead of flowers; toxins from factories upstream, combined with human waste from the shantytowns springing up on the banks, make the water unsafe—even though it must be used, out of necessity, for bathing, cleaning, washing.

Estha’s observation of the river is more succinct than Rahel’s: the river now “smelled of shit [from the inhabitants of the slums that lined its banks] and pesticides bought with World Bank loans,” smells that the new proprietors of the old History House, now a five-star hotel, could not avoid no matter how many walls they built (The God of Small Things 14, 119). Indeed, the description of Estha’s walk down the now-unfamiliar riverbank in 1993 offers a rich commentary about postcolonial modernity, linking globalization with the transnational movement of peoples. Estha passes “Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places,” a school for Dalits built by his great-grandfather, and a ration shop with “[c]heap soft-porn magazines about fictitious South Indian sex-fiends [. . .] tempting honest ration-buyers with glimpses of ripe, naked women lying in pools of fake blood” (14–15). The riverbank is the preeminent site for the text’s articulations of what postcolonial India and Ayemenem have become. While the novel is undoubtedly a critique of the incestuously
closed nature of provincial towns and cries out for the crossing of certain boundaries, most of its representations of transnational exchanges mark them as being destructive. The huge volume of traffic between Kerala and Gulf countries produces unhappiness, isolation, and houses whose implicit grandeur is undermined by the deterioration of the nation itself. Commodity culture, with its public hawking of sexual violence, twists the minds of “honest ration-buyers” and makes a mockery of a society that, in secret, beats down those who actually express their sexuality. Dalit schools are built by families that kill Dalits if, like Velutha, they become a bit too confident from all their schooling.

The description of the Meenachal in the novel—as the site of lost hopes and visions—closely parallels that of the Narmada as represented in “The Greater Common Good.” The essay, in fact, is dedicated to the Narmada River “and all the life she sustains” (Roy, Cost 5). The displacement of villagers is part of a larger environmental context: threats of deforestation (50,000 hectares of forest between the Sardar Sarovar and Narmada Sagar dams), increased siltation, disruption of ecosystems, loss of wildlife, and flooding of fertile lands. Just upstream from the yet-to-be-completed Sardar Sarovar Dam, huge deposits of silt have cut off all access to the water, forcing women to walk miles to fill their water pots, stranding cows and goats, and creating irregular currents that make the boats of Adivasis useless (49). Even further upstream, the problem is not silt deposits but uneven and unexpected flows of water from reservoirs that wash away crops that have been traditionally planted on the silt banks of the river (49–50). “Suddenly [the villagers] can’t trust their river anymore,” writes Roy. “It’s like a loved one who has developed symptoms of psychosis. Anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing” (50). Certainly, Estha and Rahel’s reflections on the river in the 1990s express that deep sense of loss. The effect of personifying the river in this way, I contend, is not to romanticize it and move it away from history but to produce a historicist understanding of change.

The two texts, belonging to different genres, produce implied audiences with slightly different experiences of the river, however. By juxtaposing the 1960s river at the end of chapter 4 with the 1990s river that greets Rahel in chapter 5, the novel does not merely tell us what “[a]nyone who has loved a river” might feel (Roy, Cost 50) but attempts to make us love the river through our reading. Citing Nixon’s term “environmental double consciousness,” and taking his concept back to W. E. B. Du Bois’ original idea of “double consciousness,” Herman describes how the readers of The God of Small Things are briefly allowed to enjoy the lushness
of the free-flowing Meenachal (already charged with Rahel’s nostalgia for her childhood) *before* being forced to view it though the 1990s lens of environmental degradation (Herman 5). One can say, then, that the novel first offers a romanticized image of the 1960s river in order to maximize the impact of its transformation when describing it in the 1990s. After chapter 5, in this view, any appropriate and holistic reading of the many scenes involving the river would have to take this “environmental double consciousness” into account: all representations of the river as being pure and pristine are always already shot through with our knowledge of the tragedy that awaits it.

With the perspective offered by Herman’s reading and the theories of Nixon and Said, coupled with our understanding of sexuality as it operates within the big/small paradigm, we can read Ammu’s representation of Velutha in the last chapter differently. First, Ammu is viewing Velutha at the very moment in the text where the tension between the big and the small is at its most intense: the moment of sexual agency is also the moment of the Terror (the consequences of resistance). When Velutha emerges from the river, having asked himself his counterfactual question, it is to a scene that is not simply a romp by the riverside but a moment of deep tragedy, a symbol of how big things crushed the radical possibilities of late-1960s India. Second, the fact that Velutha is seen as being part of nature through *Ammu*’s eyes is not necessarily elitist. Citing our earlier discussion of Said, we might say that Ammu sees herself, in a flash, as an “outsider” who has been briefly allowed in—and that if this is Velutha’s “home” then she has seen him only as an alienated being until this moment. If Velutha is made “other” by this description, then this is in accordance with the distance that the text consistently creates between Velutha and the elite voices through which its narration is focalized: a critical distancing that operates *against* a too-easy, romanticized identification with the subaltern subject.

### Communism, Class Politics, and Baby Kochamma’s Neckfat

Armed with an understanding of the novel’s left-wing and subaltern-centered orientation and its dialectic of suffering and redemption, we can now return to the specific representations of Communism that drive the CPI(M) and Ahmad’s critiques, and the larger question of political criticism. Ahmad claims that Roy’s rejection of Communism makes her “representative of the social fraction whose particular kind of radicalism she
represents” (“Reading” 108). But while Ahmad disparages this “kind of radicalism,” I am arguing that in the context of the new configurations of the post–Cold War Left, carefully distinguishing between various non-Marxist radicalisms for the purpose of clarity and dialogue remains quite important for (Marxist) critics of postcolonial writing. In terms of The God of Small Things, this means analyzing the novel’s representations of Communism in light of its own ideological paradigm, not against the grid of our own political views. In terms of the broader question of Roy’s “kind of radicalism,” it means engaging more honestly with the fact that an Indian and global Left exists with serious criticisms of Indian Communism and its visions. These two different kinds of analyses—of the novel’s representations of communism and of the CPI(M) itself—need to be pursued and brought together, but not conflated. Regardless of how we ultimately understand the novel with regard to its real-world political affiliations, a close reading forces us to concede that its criticism of Communism stands as a marker of its progressive and leftist politics: the rejection of a big idea that masquerades as the redeemer of the small but actually helps to crush it. Indeed, as becomes evident, the critique is forceful but nuanced: it emerges from a perspective that understands the important role Communists have played but feels deeply betrayed by it. This is not the same as the anti-Communism prevalent among post–Cold War elites.

On the surface, the basic sense that The God of Small Things is anti-Communist in the usual way seems to be true. Roy treats E. M. S. Namboodiripad irreverently in the text (“with spite,” Ahmad says [“Reading” 104]), and the novel pokes fun at the ruling party whenever it can. For instance, one passage points out that the greater part of the damage to the garden of Baby Kochamma—Ammu’s vindictive aunt—had been done by the weed that people called the Communist Patcha “because it flourished in Kerala like Communism” (The God of Small Things 27). Toward the end of the novel, Comrade Pillai’s moral and political bankruptcy suggests that Communists are corrupt and use whatever political rhetoric they need to get ahead. Described as a “professional omeletteer” (15)—one who knows the old adage about omelets and eggs—Comrade Pillai opportunistically shifts his position on caste as needed and secures his social status in the community at whatever cost. Comrade Pillai and the leaders of workers’ unions in a Communist-led state are portrayed, cynically, as “mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine” (248).

But the text itself offers up complexities around the issue of Communism that the third-person narrator—effusive and didactic on so many other issues—does not necessarily explain or gloss in any way. For instance,
when describing the Communist-led march that swarms around the family car on the way to see *The Sound of Music,* the narrator dismisses some common theories used to explain the deep roots of Communism in Kerala. Some say, the narrator reports, that the relative preponderance of Christians in southwestern India allowed for an easy replacement of “God with Marx, Satan with the bourgeoisie, Heaven with a classless society, and the Church with the Party”—but, the omniscient voice notes, most Syrian Christians were landlords and factory owners who opposed and did not encourage the Communists (*The God of Small Things* 64). Others say that Kerala’s high literacy rate may have attracted people to Communism—but the high literacy level, the novel explains, “was largely because of the Communist movement” (64, original emphasis). Indeed, the third-person narrator’s recognition of the good that the CPI(M) has done in Kerala is an opinion that the real author herself shares. For instance, after moving to Delhi and seeing how elites treat servants and workers, Roy says: “Kerala is a much more egalitarian society. Marxism gave the poor man dignity, if nothing else. It did a lot of good” (Jaggi). That Roy sharply critiques Communism despite her approval of the reforms it brought calls for a more serious reading of her position, as well as that of the novel, with regard to the CPI(M).

It is when the narrator divulges the “real secret” of Communism’s growth in Kerala that we comprehend the depth of the novel’s stinging critique:

“Communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (*The God of Small Things* 64)

The passage contains the text’s main criticisms of the Communists: that they were tied to upper castes and did not fight against either caste or communal divides, and that they ultimately never challenged the system itself. The narrator almost sneers when describing how, after E. M. S. Namboodiripad, “the flamboyant Brahmin high priest of Marxism in Kerala,” became Chief Minister of Kerala in 1957, the Communists “found themselves in the extraordinary—critics said absurd—position of having to govern a people and foment revolution simultaneously” (*The God of Small Things* 64–65). Clearly, despite the objectivist veneer of the description,
the narrator and implied author are among the “critics” being cited, for this representation of the origins of Communism and its compliance with caste hierarchies, established early in the novel, sets the stage for Comrade Pillai’s betrayal of Velutha. When Velutha comes to Pillai for help after his intercaste affair is exposed, the latter gravely informs Velutha that the Party would not support him against his employer since it “was not constituted to support workers’ indiscipline in their private life” (271).

These are the passages that spark the ire of the CPI(M), and we can safely call the narrator’s severe criticism of the Communists as being that of the implied author too, as no contrary opinion that might validate the Communists is really given voice in the novel. By this point, though, it has become clear that the novel’s criticism emerges from a leftist perspective that argues that Indian Communism counterposes class to caste and disregards the long oppression of Dalits. Regardless of what one thinks about this position, in the universe and logic of the novel Comrade Pillai has become a functionary of the big, one of “history’s henchmen” (The God of Small Things 292). To dismiss this position as reactionary or to patronize it as “petty bourgeois radicalism” without recognizing the perspective from which it emanates is, in fact, to risk proving the point: narratives of caste and gender oppression matter less than defending the party.

From outside the sphere of literary-critical analysis one can ask a different question: why is it that a progressive and leftist novel that is not dismissive of struggle and resistance and history from below is, nevertheless, hostile to Communism? The fact is that the novel’s position on Indian Communism is shared by many on the Indian Left, including Indian Marxists. The history of Communism in India, according to these perspectives, is the history of a largely reformist movement that has become part of the status quo in the states in which it has power. Radical splits from the original CPI, such as the CPI(M) in 1964 and the CPI(ML) in 1967, were either brought into the fold of reformist (mostly electoral) politics, annihilated by repression, or reduced to isolated terrorist groups. As Ross Mallick argues, the success of Indian Communists in a capitalist democracy dominated by middle and upper classes meant their interests were often opposed to the radical actions of poorer sections of society. The landed peasantry—inherently conservative and reformist—became the basis for Communist votes, for it could deliver lower-class votes through its traditional structures of power and have its interests met by a party that no longer needed radical, mass actions to remain in power (Mallick 14). The narrator’s contention in The God of Small Things that the Party survived in Kerala by ignoring backward social ideas in practice while rhetorically fighting them, “never
challenging them, never appearing not to” (The God of Small Things 64), reflects Mallick’s analysis almost word-for-word: “the CPM abandoned the lower classes in practical terms even while claiming they represent them in rhetoric” (Mallick 14). Indeed, the contradiction between the CPI(M)’s interests as a ruling party and those of lower-class militants often came to a head; in the most extreme case in West Bengal (where the CPI(M) has ruled longest), Mallick contends, “hundreds of untouchables and tribal peoples have been killed by Communist policemen trying to control the radical movements” (16).

Achin Vanaik writes, further, that when the Left parties have participated in the “new social movements” around caste and gender egalitarianism, they

have too often behaved as if the economic is the only reality or invariably the most important one [...]. Thus the legitimacy of autonomous organization by Dalits or women is often denied and the approach of leftists toward such movements essentially manipulative and paternalistic, focusing on giving them the “correct class line” which, of course, they are best able to provide as a result of their “superior” analysis of Indian reality. No wonder participants in such movements look upon traditional left organizations with suspicion. (200)

Those who defend the CPI(M) need to come to terms with how real political disagreements around fighting social oppression have laid the ground for the “anti-Communism” of left-wing intellectuals. The charges that Roy, through the narrator, lays at the door of the CPI(M) cannot be simply dismissed by asserting, for instance, that “it is quite implausible that a Communist trade union leader would actively conspire in a murderous assault on a well-respected member of his own union so as to uphold caste purity” (A. Ahmad, “Reading” 105). Kalpana Wilson argues, in fact, that “[t]he failure of some on the left to grasp the significance of Roy’s progressive politics springs partly from narrow sectarianism, but also partly from an inability to grasp the importance of patriarchy, the main focus of Roy’s attack, to the reproduction of capitalism.”

These are undoubtedly ideological questions and open to debate and discussion, but rather than engaging the debate, the CPI(M)-affiliated critique dismisses it out of hand. A more careful reading of the representations of Communism in the novel than the CPI(M)’s reveals an ambiguity in the novel on the question, one that emerges from the incompleteness of the paradigm of big things and small things. Despite being vilified by the
third-person narrator, Communism also emerges as the marker of freedom in the novel: for example, Velutha participates in the Party’s rallies, Estha uses Velutha’s “Marxist” flag to mark his independence (answering affirmatively to Rahel’s question, “Are we going to have to become a Communist?” [The God of Small Things 191]), and Communism is key to the trenchant critique of Baby Kochamma’s class position. The march in chapter 2—the centerpiece of novel’s discussion of Communism—exemplifies both the ambiguities and progressive possibilities of Roy’s representation of it.

From the outset, the representation of the march is mixed, alternating between an ironic tone consistent with the reading of the novel as “anti-Communist” and one that bears a real sympathy for the Communist-affiliated marchers. The family car—with Chacko driving, Ammu in the front seat, and Baby Kochamma sitting between Rahel and Estha in the back—is held up on its trip to Abhilash Talkies by a march led by the Travancore-Cochin Marxist Labour Union. Although the march is dismissed as cheap theatre—“part of [the] process” of “harnessing anger for parliamentary purposes” with the Communist “orchestra . . . petitioning its conductor [the Communist government]”—the paddy workers’ demands for lunch breaks and raises and for a stop to caste-discrimination in the workplace are represented as genuine (The God of Small Things 66–67). As vehicles on the road become transformed into “islands in a sea of people” and the march engulfs them, the atmosphere in the family car gathers like a tense fist. The contradictory portrayal of Communism continues. First, we have a continuation of Ammu’s mockery of her brother Chacko’s pretensions at being a Marxist despite his exploitation of workers (multiplied for women workers through sexual harassment) as a factory boss. When Chacko advises everyone to roll up the windows, Ammu asks, “Why not join them, comrade?” (62); when her Cambridge-educated brother gets angry at a protester who punches the hood, Ammu says, “How could he possibly know that in this old car there beats a truly Marxist heart?” (68). And yet, the narrator does not dismiss the march, but recognizes “an edge to [the] anger that was Naxalite, and new” (67). The march is described in glowing terms, as a site for utopian solidarity and change: it brings together male and female paddy workers, “party workers, students, and the laborers themselves. Touchables and Untouchables” (67). The residual irony in this last statement, if any, is more about foreshadowing the demise of this unity rather than any “anti-Communism.”

At this moment, two events happen, apparently unrelated but which the narrative (via Baby Kochamma) ties together neatly. First, Rahel sees
Velutha in the march, hoisting a red flag and with “angry veins in his neck” (The God of Small Things 68). Excited, she rolls down the window, sticks her body out, and calls to him; Velutha, surprised, quickly disappears into the mass of people. As her mother fiercely hauls her into the car, Rahel, also surprised, wonders why everyone doubts her claim to have seen Velutha (68); it is only after catching Estha’s thought signals that she pretends not to have seen him (77). The car and the march act as the symbols and guardians of class boundaries in the scene, forbidding cross-class alliances between friends when the lines are drawn so sharply. Ammu whisks Rahel into the car; Velutha steps away and tries to avoid recognition.

In describing the second incident involving the march, however, the novel achieves its most brilliant depiction of ruling-class interests and fear. As marchers swarm the car and red flags fill the air—and the possibility emerges that the workers might breach the elite space of the vehicle—Baby Kochamma becomes uncontrollably nervous. “Terror, sweat, and talcum powder [blend] into a mauve paste between Baby Kochamma’s rings of neckfat” as she fantasizes about the possibility of meeting the violent Naxalites who were featured in recent newspaper reports (The God of Small Things 76). Soon enough, the marchers open Rahel’s unlocked door and crowd in to take a look at the family. Drawn to Baby Kochamma’s frightened look, they name her Modadali Mariakutty (“Landlord Maria”) and make her wave a red flag (later to become Estha’s) saying Inquilab Zindabad, “Long Live the Revolution!” (76–77). Humiliated, Baby Kochamma focuses all her fury on Velutha; in her imagination, it was he who had handed her the flag, who had named her Modadali Mariakutty and who had laughed at her (78). This animosity ultimately seals Velutha’s fate.

But Ammu’s political feelings about the march are different, and they emerge only later as we witness the beginning of her attraction to Velutha. Seeing Velutha play with Rahel in the woods on the side of the house—just as history is getting caught off guard, as I described earlier—Ammu “hoped that it had been him that Rahel saw on the march. She hoped it had been him that raised his flag and knotted arm in anger. She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (The God of Small Things 167). The march and the characters’ different reactions to it correspond to the very different representations of Communism in the text, including those that are not explicitly portrayed as part of the text’s debate with Communism. On the one hand, the march is run by the CPI(M), the rulers of the state and the representatives of the big,
and the text does not hesitate to suggest, ironically, that the entire event is orchestrated. On the other hand, the narrator aligns Velutha, Ammu, and the children together with the march, and employs the march and the marchers themselves as tools to disrupt the ancient class hatreds of Baby Kochamma—the representative of the vilified ruling elite. Furthermore, the passage in which Ammu hopes that Velutha was in the march (perhaps explaining her abruptness to Rahel in the car) also aligns Ammu and Velutha politically, not simply physically, contesting Ahmad’s claim that Ammu and Velutha “become pure embodiments of desire” and have no political relationship (“Reading” 105). As Bose suggests, the moment in which Ammu hopes that Velutha was in the march highlights her recognition of a “shared rage” that, indeed, makes it possible for her to “desire the Untouchable Velutha” (B. Bose 64). Indeed, Ammu and Velutha are intimately linked by their ability to rebel at different times, though they do not articulate their rebellions in a recognizably political discourse. The same phrase that Ammu uses to reject the policeman’s attempts to squash her voice early in the novel (“Ammu said she’d see about that” [9]) is repeated—or echoed, in terms of a diachronic narrative of events—when Mammachi tells a betrayed Velutha that the consequences for him will be severe (“We’ll see about that” [269]). Both fail in their rebellions, but it is their willingness to stand up against power that clearly unites them.

With the linking of Velutha and Ammu around the march, the economic, social, and personal are linked together in a productive way, operating in contrast to Communism but also in a scenario created by Communist agitators. Kalpana Wilson argues that Roy’s originality “lies in the way she manages to show us the interconnections between the deep contradictions within this family and those between the social class they belong to and the working people, as she gradually lays bare the tensions beneath the idyllic and nostalgic vision of a 1960s family outing to that clean, white cinematic fantasy, ‘The Sound of Music.’” Significantly, the narrative itself does not explicitly highlight these links as an uncovering of class relations, which would require recognition of the centrality of class to the novel and, in turn, would problematize its representation of Marxism (which, for Roy, equals Communism) and raise questions about its free-floating paradigm of big things and small things. Roy’s conceptual framework does not allow the paradox she presents to be examined. Still, there can be no greater example than the march to show how strongly Velutha and the marginal voices of the novel are symbolically connected with Communism, problematizing, then, a simple reading of the novel as “anti-Communist.”
The political contributions of *The God of Small Things* are important to understanding the place of the postcolonial Indian English author today. By drawing out the real economic and social relations between the different characters in the novel and, in effect, the “truth” of social oppression, Roy “comes down squarely [. . .] in favor of a materialist” reading of the questions of gender and caste, as opposed to a postmodernist rejection of structured hierarchies, subjectivities, and material relations (Kalpana Wilson). From this perspective, it becomes clear that the text’s political paradigm is more complicated and progressive than its CPI(M)-affiliated critics have supposed. One aspect of the novel’s “anti-Communism,” for instance, is an excitement about rank-and-file workers, a firm support of their struggle against bureaucracy, and the critique of a narrow class politics that is inattentive to gender, sexual, and caste oppression. In particular, the representation of the Dalit character as central to the story is unique in the genre of the postcolonial Indian English novel. While the novel might appear to represent the “particular kind of radicalism” of the contemporary cosmopolitan elite (A. Ahmad, “Reading “ 108), it is important to recognize that the content of that radicalism is rapidly changing in light of a resurgence of activism around the environment, globalization, and war. Roy’s early essays translated the political paradigm of big things and small things across genres, from the space of literature to that of nonfiction and political engagement. But her recent work on Iraq and Kashmir, for instance, has pushed far beyond those limits, giving voice to a new, “shared rage” against the violent conditions and deteriorating living standards of people all over the globe. The “fruits of development,” as ironically described with regard to the Narmada Dam in “The Greater Common Good,” have continued to spread, engendering displacement, rising prices, hunger, brutal wars, and death for millions—along with tougher laws allowing greater surveillance by “history’s henchmen” (Roy, *Cost 41*). At the same time, a new radicalization oriented around mass actions in some places and small struggles in others is laboring to come into being. A central aspect of this new moment, not yet fully emerged, is this new confidence in subaltern agency and in the representation of that agency. Roy has been able to articulate the new radicalism of this moment in her political essays. I contend that this perspective is, in fact, rooted in *The God of Small Things* itself.

Indeed, the unsatisfactory treatment of Roy’s different writings by CPI(M)-affiliated figures and publications can be understood in a broader
context: their uncertainty in relating to the growing prominence of Left intellectuals and leaders in the post–Cold War period who are actively engaged in radical politics and skeptical of postmodernist/new-left paradigms even as they remain unaffiliated with parties such as the CPI(M). Undoubtedly, characterizing the global Left that is forming since the mid-1990s has been a challenging task. It has included forces and ideas that are anti-state (Zapatistas), pro-state (Chavez), and oriented toward radical movements toward reforms in the here and now (Bolivia). Some leftist theorists have emphasized the continuing of imperialist aggression in the context of a hierarchy of nation-states (Gilbert Achcar), while others—unconvincingly, in my view—have declared the end of centralized empires in a “post-capitalist” economy no longer dominated by dominant nation-states (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to conduct a full-fledged assessment of Roy’s position in relation to these various approaches to questions of anti-statism, reform and revolution, postcapitalism, and so on. But it is clear the CPI(M) and Roy enter into these debates about the shape of the post–Cold War Left from distinctly opposed positions. Indeed, the 2007 violence in Nandigram, West Bengal—where villagers and antiglobalization activists met with deadly force while opposing the ruling CPI(M) and its collusion with neoliberal development—have become a flashpoint for a global debate and reassessment about the state of the Indian Left itself and the CPI(M)’s place within it. Roy’s active condemnation of CPI(M) actions in Nandigram re-enacts, as it were, the ways in which the implied author of The God of Small Things also speaks out against what she sees as the Indian Communists’ disregard of ordinary people’s lives.

Recovering the radical political paradigm of The God of Small Things ought to be distinguished from whether the Marxist or political critic agrees with that paradigm. Demanding that literary texts provide a clear political agenda for emancipation, as Frederick Aldama has convincingly argued, both overestimates what literature can do in the realm of society and underestimates what it actually accomplishes in the realm of the imagination. One can discover the political frameworks that a text has to offer and then raise questions about them separately—keeping the two stages of analysis relatively independent from one another. From a historical-materialist point of view, for instance, the big/small paradigm does not adequately answer the question of revolution and transcendence of capitalism. Like Thompsonian “histories from below,” Roy’s work affirms the possibility of representation (one can be “a voice for the voiceless”) and, thus, alternative historiographies (that history can be rewritten from
the perspective of the oppressed). But despite this clear break from postmodernist epistemology and historiography, Roy’s paradigm runs the risk of delinking the oppression of the subaltern from the structures that create that oppression. While Roy’s writings offer a devastating and powerful critique of modernity and help to rally the forces of the Left whenever they appear, they offer no alternative to that modernity, locked as they are into a model that sees all big institutions as being so powerful that nothing remains beyond fighting the good fight to the best of one’s ability: mobilizing marches, calling for boycotts, being a public intellectual. I say “beyond” as if what Roy is doing is commonplace; in fact, she stands at the forefront of Left intellectuals who have become public voices for resistance. Still, the view that “power” is a diffuse, omnipresent phenomenon that cannot be explained, and that big answers that attempt to grasp the totality are totalitarian, is ultimately at a remove from Marxist paradigms that place a critique of capitalism at the center of their analysis of oppression. Even though Roy’s “narrative from below” model is quite different from the postmodernist rejection of historicity itself, it shares the limitation of only being able to describe differential locations of power struggles without imagining their transcendence. And yet, as discussed above, Roy’s discussion of the Indian Maoists in the Tehelka interview does point to a nuanced way of understanding resistance movements, representing a position that is far closer to Marxist analyses than most.

The God of Small Things, then, represents an alternative to the dominant tendencies in the post-Emergency novel—and, politically speaking, produces a historicist and subaltern-centered perspective that is unique in the postcolonial Indian English novel as a whole. While we have discussed major characters and themes, it is worth noting that the depth of Roy’s political perspectives is often hidden away in minor characters such as Muralidharan, the naked lunatic whom Estha sees as he sits atop a milestone on the Kochin Road, his penis pointing down toward the sign. At first Muralidharan appears to be like “Rose’s beggar” in Nayantara Sahgal’s Rich Like Us in the sense that he too is armless and helpless, little more than a victim. But we learn that like the Beggar—who turns out to have been part of a sharecroppers’ rebellion—Muralidharan too has a story: his arms were blown off in Singapore in 1942 as a member of the Indian National Army, the force assembled by Subhas Chandra Bose to fight the British colonizers through an alliance with Japan and Germany. Muralidharan is not only a victim of modernity, thus, but a reminder of resistance and struggle—of an anticolonial but non-Gandhian variety. Despite his madness, and the fact that he “had no home, no doors to
lock,” he keeps “his old keys tied carefully around his waist,” symbolically holding onto hope when it was long gone (61). He is a symbol of those who are displaced, worldwide, but refuse to give up their right of return.

The difference between the strategies of characterization in Roy’s Muralidharan and Sahgal’s Beggar indicates why the namak-halal of Roy’s text is so different despite the fact that it, too, focuses on problems of elite guilt and complicity. In Sahgal, the Beggar is a character whose main function is to tell his story to Sonali, the elite protagonist, for the purposes of her own development. As I discussed in the last chapter, Sonali then grants the Beggar prosthetic arms as the text works him into a narrative of elite redemption through service of the poor. In Roy, however, Muralidharan is much more problematic as a character for elite consumption. That Estha notices him at all is reflective of his character, always attentive to the margins, and the opening that the novel offers for elite solidarity and empathy with the small. But, Estha does not know Muralidharan’s story and can only notice 1) that the landscape looks misshapen through the plastic bag Muralidharan wears on his head, and 2) the differences in color and shape of Muralidharan’s hair between his head, his chest, and his pubic area. Small himself but shamed by his desire to know more about this difference, he can’t think of whom to ask about Muralidharan’s hair and looks away instead. Whereas the translation from subaltern suffering to elite understanding in Rich Like Us is simply a matter of elite self-reflection and action, in The God of Small Things elite knowledge is blocked by class and sexual repression (rich little boys ought not to look at naked lunatics) and ignorance (the grown-ups would not know Muralidharan’s story anyway). In both texts we learn about the story behind the subaltern’s victimization, but in Roy’s he is actually given a name and an identity, and the implied audience is made to reflect upon the processes by which elite blindness actually occurs. Indeed, the references to Muralidharan’s past require some independent research on the part of the reader, and, as he never appears again, his story is at risk of being once again marginalized and forgotten. When it is remembered, however, we can comprehend the vast historical canvas on which Roy depicts power and powerlessness, making Velutha’s story simply one of the many small stories that need to be recovered.

The explicit critique of Communism, combined with the postmodern aesthetics of The God of Small Things, offers an important lesson to Marxist and/or political critics, as it can distract readers from the leftist political ideology of the novel. The links between the novel and Roy’s political works raise the stakes even higher. Without recognizing that pro-
gressive and even class-oriented political and artistic projects often reject Marxism in the aftermath of Stalinism, Marxist theorists and activists risk cutting themselves off from the new movements sweeping the entire world. But when they—we—look beyond the apparent or real “anti-Marxism” of such Left voices and engage them in dialogue and struggle, we can see that they share many common perspectives in battling that new imperialism, as Roy and Ahmad undoubtedly do. As class inequalities grow around the world amidst a new economic crisis, and the ideologies of neoliberalism, privatization, and deregulation expose their flaws, the ground beneath the feet of Indian English writers is shifting. In this context, the namak-halaal and subaltern-centered approaches evident in The God of Small Things are sure to proliferate, notwithstanding the Western political contexts that dominate the production and consumption of English-language texts.