Beside the west: postcolonial women writers in a transnational frame

Man's history has to be built by the united effort of all the races in the world, and therefore this selling of conscience for political reasons – this making a fetish of one's country, won't do. I know that Europe does not at heart admit this, but there she has not the right to pose as our teacher. (Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World*)

Introduction: the postcolonial and the global

Contemporary readings of the postcolonial in literary and cultural critique often see the concept as connected in complex ways with a globalised world distinguished by transnational capital flows and widely ramifying technological networks. The *transnational* in this respect is taken as signifying the movements of peoples, signs, goods and capital that overarch or bypass the nation. According to this view, the postcolonial, like the transnational or the global, refers to multicultural, cross-border activities and commitments, combining a focus on issues of migrancy, diaspora and nomadism, with its seeming converse, a concern with questions of home and belonging. The postcolonial world by this reckoning is culturally wired like the globalised world; its systems of cultural exchange, too, are market-driven and commodified. The tacit admission is, however, that its centres of power remain concentrated, as they do, in the western metropole.

As is illustrated by my intentional confusion above of terms of description and analysis, the reading of the postcolonial as symbiotic if not at points coincident with the global can present problematically in so far as it passes itself off as diagnosis. The particular, characteristic forms of the postcolonial are elided or explained away on the basis of their alleged analogies with the global. The confusion is further compounded by the view of postcoloniality, as opposed to its close verbal analogue, critical postcolonialism, as a global regime of cultural value governed by late capitalist systems of commodity exchange, as in the definition of Graham Huggan. An influential outlook on the postcolonial thus
correlates processes of globalisation with paradigms of cultural critique. It converts certain ‘global effects’ (of cultural ambiguity, hybridity, and the like), which are by no means widely accepted as applicable across the world, into normative definitions of a global, and postcolonial, condition.

This chapter does not aim to engage in a debate on whether to support or reject such explicatory definitions, although I should say that my concern is always to see the postcolonial as oppositional to neocolonial, global discourses rather than as collusive with them. At the same time, however, precisely because of the apparently neat conceptual fit between the contemporary understandings of the postcolonial, the transnational and the global, I should like to investigate the overlap more critically than widely accepted assumptions generally allow. I want to do so in particular by asking the question of how nationalist concerns, too, impact upon that fit. Does the national cut across, disallow or co-operate with the transnational? Such an investigation can probably be most effectively carried out by way of a comparative and symptomatic reading of two differently placed writers (both previously introduced in this book), who share transnational, or at least translocal, and nationalist preoccupations: the Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera and the New Delhi-located Arundhati Roy. Placing the two in dialogue as regards these preoccupations will achieve two main aims. First, it will implement what I have already alluded to as the interactive, cross-border dynamic of postcolonialism. Second, it will encourage ‘the crucial articulation of sameness and difference’ that is fundamental to postcolonial critical enquiry, which a generalising global or transnational focus may not adequately address. Eventually, this reading should go some way to providing a critical if inevitably oblique commentary on the epigraph from the anti-nationalist internationalist Rabindranath Tagore which appears above; to suggesting, that is to say, that valorising one’s country may be one way of participating in a wider global exchange.

It is worth saying that to set the non-metropolitan Vera–Roy pairing in a comparative framework is perhaps especially appropriate in that it activates a specific political and historical definition of the transnational, which correlates, too, with more progressive formulations of the postcolonial. The transnational, or international, in this sense additionally denotes the interaction and exchange of news, information, cultural influence, etc., between peripheries, ‘between’ readerships, communities and cultures of the Third World, or, as here, between writers, so at least nominally cutting out the western metropole as a venue of the exchange. To be sure, the mention of a comparative framework can appear to hark back to the at times narrow, contrastive structures of more conventional comparative literary studies, often confined to literatures in European languages, which embrace certain early versions of postcolonial studies. In practice these frameworks tended either to over-relativise the different poles of the comparative, or to enforce commonalities on the basis of
joint experiences of colonisation and decolonisation. If nothing else, the English language, even if adapted, modified, and so on, was regarded in readings like these as providing a definitively western medium on the basis of which the comparative might be established. Such readings, in short, were perforce routed by way of European regimes of cultural value, even if covertly so. As against such extremes, I would want to suggest that a dialogic, margin-margin comparative method should, at least ideally, minimise the intervention of the metropolitan go-between. Especially as both Vera and Roy concern themselves not so much with transnational issues as with the question, succinctly put, of the 'women's nation', a comparative linkage should help prepare the ground for a politically motivated critique of an overvalorised global transnationalism, and of the postcolonial as normatively cross-border.

As this might imply, the attempt to plot preoccupations in common between Roy and Vera is to an extent made possible by the fact that both write with an awareness of the pressure of neocolonial forces upon local lives. Representing different regions of the decolonised world, they speak of how these spaces have been stereotyped and peripheralised in relation to the west and even, in Roy's case, to one another – where, say, Africa signifies savage darkness to India as well as the west. Both writers, too, identify locally – decidedly so – yet both also gesture across frontlines, cross-nationally, especially in their efforts to foreground women's feelings and causes. Even if inadvertently, both Vera and Roy activate that description of the postcolonial as entailing cultural dialogue across national borders.

Simultaneously, however, despite such characteristically postcolonial involvements, both writers have continued to commit themselves, although often subtly and critically, to that political entity which has loomed large in processes of decolonisation as in postcolonial readings – the nation, and the house, home or enclosed room as its favoured surrogates. Although evidently aware of how national structures have conventionally marginalised women, the two writers ultimately settle for the (recast) nation, if at times in a by-the-bye fashion, as establishing a legitimate political space, certainly one from which to negotiate with anonymous global/transnational forces. Even if fascinated by spatial movement and cultural change, they also – the more so – assert the importance of location and locale – the rooms, stores, verandahs, villages, where women's lives unfold. As will become apparent in the course of the chapter, the force of the cross-national comparative method will thus be ironically – and indicatively – to ground the two writers more firmly in their own particular cultural and national spaces.

Transnationalism for women

Earlier readings in this book have noted that postcolonial women writers from Africa, India and elsewhere in the (Third) world, intent upon speaking their
identity through narrative, have been hard-pressed to write a space for themselves either within or even on the margins of the postcolonial nation. However, by engaging with their condition as women *vis-à-vis* that nation, or in relation to a nationally circumscribed space, these writers have succeeded even so in addressing issues of belonging that have both *national* and *translocal* resonances, on occasion establishing cross-border affiliations as they proceed.

With this in mind, it is worth spending a moment looking more closely at feminist postcolonial understandings of the cross-national or translocal. (These terms are less obviously tied to the operations of multinational corporations than is ‘transnational’ although translocal links, too, can be forged through globalising processes of cultural dissemination. ‘International’ of course denotes a crucial Marxist legacy of internationalist organisation which has historically, however, often sidelined women’s issues.) In what ways have feminist critics of women’s writing found in the cross-national and diasporic a hospitable axis on which to place their reading of this work? To attempt this question should give a perspective on the hegemony of the transnational in postcolonial criticism; those ways in which the postcolonial novel today, defined as diasporic and multilingual, yet often Eurocentric in reference, is seen in contradistinction to the 1960s novel of decolonisation based in the nation. By way of bringing these queries round full circle: is it the case, as this study may itself imply on several occasions, that the nation’s exclusion of women has contributed (along with postmodern theories of identity as fluid and multiple) to the retreat of the nation and the rise of the transnational as a horizon of expectation for postcolonial women writers and critics?

The contemporary understanding of the transnational/translocal is obviously closely informed not only by policies and processes relating to globalisation, but by theories of migration and diaspora. These, while addressing the historical movements of people, are founded upon a critique of fixed origins and ethnic absolutes: in Avtar Brah’s words, diaspora ‘takes account of a homing desire, as distinct from a desire for a “homeland”’. As Paul Gilroy influentially argues in *The Black Atlantic*, cunningly shifting postcolonial and cultural studies preoccupations from ‘roots’ to ‘routes’, modern black identities were developed in motion, through the transmission of peoples and cultural influences, through encounter and dialogue, rather than by way of a competition between static entities. One of the advantages of this shift away from looking at identities as based on essences and set material conditions is that it encourages the discussion of subjectivity, especially national subjectivity, as interactive as opposed to *sui generis*. The transnational axes of diaspora and migration instate a valuable relationality between national formations, and, as suggested, encourage comparative, interdisciplinary readings of national cultures and literatures. Importantly for women, national identity, like identity in diasporic contexts, is according to this perspective seen as multi-
ply inflected in relation to the different constituencies of class, religion, race, gender, language, generation, that may pertain. In the view of Doreen Massey, diaspora emphasises that the normative division of geopolitical space into the bounded, historically linear entity of the nation has to be opened out in relation to other juxtaposed and co-existent modes of spatialisation.¹⁰

It is here, in the area of the crossover between spaces and subjectivities, that women writers find particular affinities with the transnational and/or the translocal. In *Postcolonial Representations*, a comparative study of cultural métissage in women’s writing, Françoise Lionnet has boldly examined the potential and significance of such relationality for women. While she does not use the term ‘transnational’ as such, her concern is to develop a qualifiedly ‘universal’ feminism that involves making constant negotiations between and across boundaries, and between the particular and the universal, in order to address the dissymmetries of power that impact on women’s lives. Without disavowing the nation (which inhabits her frame of particularity), she insists on a dialogue between ‘the nature and function of feminism as a global process and the social function of femininity within different cultural contexts’. This is in order, ultimately, to arrive at an intersubjective though locally grounded political space for women, where reciprocity becomes possible (an assertion of sameness as well as difference), as well as, ideally, the achievement of ‘a consensus about the possibility [for women] of sharing certain beliefs’.¹¹ Whereas the assertion of the particular and the absolute within the nation tends to collapse the other’s experience into the self’s, the translocal/transnational not only allows but stimulates that other focus.

Lionnet’s observations relate to Yvonne Vera and Arundhati Roy’s work, in that both writers are concerned to structure their narratives to evoke women’s intersubjectivity and to represent women in interrelationship. At significant points in Vera women’s voices are interlinked or superimposed the one upon the other. In *The Stone Virgins* (2002), for example, as Nonceba is recovering from her wounds in hospital, images of her dead sister intertwine in her memory with remembered snatches of their conversation. In *The God of Small Things* (1997), too, Rahel’s memories of her childhood frame Ammu’s stream-of-consciousness as she registers her growing desire for the *dalit* Velutha. At the same time, however, Roy and Vera’s novels are firmly grounded within distinct, bounded geographies, as if as a quiet reminder that the postcolonial nation and region – Zimbabwe or India, Matabeleland or Kerala – remain important sites of identity-formation and mobilisation. To put the case more strongly, these writers experiment with alternative, heterogeneous constructions of community which, however, remain characteristically nationalist in certain key respects.¹² As the globalised margins have not yet been allowed to arrive at the global system’s centre – they appear to agree – the nation cannot be disbanded as a viable space for political self-expression.
Before commenting in more detail on their significant continuation of the national within the transnational, I will first look more closely at questions of self-representation, location in space and interrelationship as interpreted by these two writers. I will comment on Vera’s second and fifth novels, Without a Name (1994) and The Stone Virgins, prominent in her oeuvre for their vivid spatialisation of women’s experience. By contrast, her first novel Nehanda (1993) offers a mythopoeic (and explicitly unlocalised) rendition of the eponymous voice of the spirit-medium of the 1890s land wars or chimurenga, and Under the Tongue (1996) is the deeply internalised narrative of a victim of incest. Butterfly Burning (1998), also strongly spatialised, was discussed in chapter 10. Thereafter, shifting away from the topic of Arundhati Roy’s reception in the west, which was the focus of chapter 9, I will offer an intertextual commentary on her first and to date only novel The God of Small Things and of her non-fictional polemic against transnationalism.

Large nations, small gods

Many recent commentaries have noted that the postcolonial novel in English, in particular the Indian novel, is profoundly transnational or perhaps more accurately international in terms of its informing traditions, intertextual structures of expression and modes of reception. It is in consequence of this ‘internationalism’ that critics have rushed to nominate the epic-size, promiscuously allusive Rushdiesque Indian novel in English as the desirable, hybridised other to the reviled purism of the west. Although Zimbabwean fiction in English has always been more nationally centred than, say, Indian or even Nigerian writing (hence the controversy over Marechera: see chapter 8), it, too, has been international in its make-up, certainly with respect to its implied audience, and even in its social realist commitments. The writing of both Roy and Vera complies with these ‘international’ terms of description. Roy’s novel, for instance, engages intertextually with Rushdie’s manner and style. Vera, meanwhile, who like Roy has lived and studied in the west for a period of time, and whose novels arguably ‘dialogue’ with Zimbabwean writers like Marechera, Hove and Mungoshi, concentrates on voicing women’s historical pain, an issue which, with local modifications, relates women-centred politics across the world.

Therefore, although their writing does not demonstrate transborder, cross-ocean or indeed intra-Third World preoccupations in any consistent way, parallel developments and convergences in relation to particular thematic and stylistic concerns can be traced. To pinpoint such a commonality, they may both be said to explore how women’s identity is formulated and reshaped in interaction with male imaginings of identity, and with shifting, often contested, conceptions of space and historical change. While they may not be centrally concerned with Fredric Jameson’s allegory of the Third-World nation,
they are broadly involved in the fictional revision of different axes of the post-independence social imaginary, of which national subjectivity may be one. If their closest point of identification is thus in effect a negative space, that is, their avoidance of the conventional national allegory, their practice can even so be compared on the grounds of their shared concern to rework the national space from their own particular political perspectives as women.

Gillian Rose’s still invaluable theory of women’s space sheds further light on this idea of shifting and multiply located identity. The emphasis in her work on constellated locales and on diversified space as resistant to homogeneous, ‘masculine’ space, importantly nuances transnationalism’s possible association with the system of global capitalism. In particular, she observes that masculine – and for this she also reads western – forms of knowing are based on the linked premises of exhaustiveness and exclusivity: the west knows everything possible, and everything worth knowing. How then, she asks, is this discourse of engulfing exhaustiveness to be broken open? How should other forms of definition be made to apply? She offers two related pathways – pathways which connect with Brah and Massey’s earlier formulations. First, Rose asserts the important existence of other axes of social identity. While this may be self-evident, the point is useful for underlining the need to explore intersections and imbrications between these axes. Second, she suggests, it is possible to create new possibilities for identity beyond the conventional same/other dualism by allowing for self-articulation across gradations of difference. In short, like Brah and Lionnet, she invites postcolonial and feminist critics to view difference relationally. As this implies, Rose conceptualises such shifts of power spatially, as an explosion of the centre-margin picture and the recognition instead of dispersed and diverse spatialities – those the peripheralised have tended to occupy. Borrowing a phrase from Teresa de Lauretis, Rose conceives of identity as a constellation of elsewhere, or, in Rosemary M. George’s conceptualisation, subjectivity or ‘home’ is at once dispersed and resituated.

To relate these ideas to Vera and Roy, a key common element linking their fiction is that each narrates the breaking of social, familial and national taboos, and women’s consequent loss. *Without a Name* tells of rape followed by infanticide; *The Stone Virgins* of acts of horrific murder and mutilation committed as part of a civil war. *The God of Small Things* speaks in richly decorative prose of incest (again) and cross-caste sexual trespassing. In each one of these tales, the shift of women’s experience to centre stage displaces, indeed replaces, the national imaginary from the foreground. The here and now is the alley, the room, the secret-house verandah, the store verandah, wherever the central characters are able, often precariously, to locate themselves (in literally peripheral spaces). Alongside this, the novels if in very different ways demonstrate an awareness of the global or translocal forces that impinge on, at times violate, these private, internal spaces. Considering how they thus witness to different
kinds of cross-border interchange, transgression and self-division, the following question emerges. Is it possible to see these texts as beginning to constitute women’s subjectivity as a constellation of elsewheres, that is, as coinciding with the nation, impacted by the global, yet ramifying beyond these spaces also?

In *Without a Name*, as in *Butterfly Burning* or *Under the Tongue*, Yvonne Vera is concerned to retrieve a women’s discourse (often, literally, spoken), from the interstices of the heroic narrative of the nation and of the male (and colonial) domination which underpins it. While Nyenyedzi, Masvita’s lover in *Without a Name*, grounds his personal understanding of the nation upon an unconditional loyalty to the land, conventionally a male medium in Vera, Masvita the central character wanders half-dead and homeless across the land. Her rape by a freedom fighter has alienated her from this space as mythic, ancestral ground. Indeed, her rapist so identifies with the cult of the people as the land’s children that he is described as having ‘grown’ from the earth. He also, chillingly, calls her sister (‘Hanzvadzi’). Yet, far from her opposition to the ‘father’-land serving as a position of strength, Masvita’s wounded incomprehension of what has happened as anything other than brute violence condemns her to a sterile condition of victimhood. Hers is a desperate, destructively translocal search for a sense of autonomous selfhood. She views history and the spaces she travels through piecemeal – not relationally. In the later novel *The Stone Virgins* women as both victims and survivors are drawn willy-nilly into the arena of public, national, male-authored history. The novel’s title refers, significantly, to San paintings in the Motopa hills in western Zimbabwe depicting virgins sacrificed before the burial of a king. In this novel the pain of history is, arguably, transcended, not through evasion but by means of confrontation, negotiation, and the slow process of healing which follows.

In *Without a Name* Masvita’s act of killing her baby by breaking its neck is the last and most ‘frightful’ in a series of dispossessions from home and tradition that began with the rape which conceived it. Her inability to claim the (male) child, signalled by her failure to name it (and so give it a lineage), is because the moment of its conception for her, too, represented the loss of ‘her name’, a rupture with the past and the obliteration of memory (*WN* 29, 75, 79–80). It is only upon her final return to her village, when her elderly mother welcomes her by name and thus reclaims her into the interconnected matriliny, that the recovery of memory seems, even if momentarily, to become possible. Vera’s intention, as she has herself said, is to insert individual narratives, including women’s narratives, into the ‘big history the historians write about’. While this statement would appear to dislodge women from their traditional iconic yet subsidiary role *vis-à-vis* cultural nationalism, it is significant that Masvita the aberrant mother, self-excluded from the past and the land, can even so be read as symbolic of that nation’s unfruitful, alienated condition pre-independence.
The role she plays is of course deeply negative, yet Masvita as symbol is in this sense broadly comparable with the Mother Africa figure of more traditional nationalist narratives. Like the nation she, too, is degraded, betrayed, violated, exploited: ‘1977. It was nothing to see a woman ... with a baby fixed spidery on her back’ (WN 36). Masvita is doubly representative, at once of the nation and of the displaced underclass of abused, rootless women in the nation, whose life-stories are disruptive of the conventional story of national unity. She is in fact at her most symbolic at those points where her condition emblematises contradiction. She is the nation that cannot offer its people a home; she represents the debased state of freedom in a country where women are oppressed in the name of independence, and where ‘Revolution’ is most fully experienced, at least in the city, as a commercial brand-name (WN 46, 26–7). Bearing her dead baby like ‘a hole’ on her back, Masvita epitomises the people’s dispossession, first by colonialism, then by war (WN 86). She has ‘lost her centre’, ‘the past [has] vanished’ (WN 3); she attempts to split herself to escape her pain: ‘She wanted one other of her’ (WN 19). Produced out of these absences Masvita’s deed of infanticide is an almost predictable culmination of her dislocation: the sabotage of the national family at its root.

However, as a woman’s act the murder is also intended as an impossible strike for freedom, impossible because Masvita’s identity is already split and in spatial limbo, stripped of ‘fixed loyalties’ – and the act is of course fundamentally destructive (WN 25, 34, 95–6). The single moment of transcendence which weighs against this is when, on hearing mbira music on the bus back to her home village, she experiences a passing feeling of benediction. It is a transitory moment, literally experienced in transit (WN 69). Forced to exist in an open-ended nomadic future, Masvita begins effectively to elect for this provisionality. She has learned to mistrust fully formed ideals, as well as rounded ‘hand-held’ consumer dreams: ‘It was better to begin in sections’, she feels, ‘not with everything completed and whole’ (WN 45–6, 81). The thickly stitched apron in which she winds her dead baby is picked up from a street-seller she happens to pass. Again and again her subjectivity is shaped as she goes along, negotiated in ad hoc, provisional ways, moving between the city and the village (WN 55). By implication, therefore, Masvita’s groundlessness, in so far as it constitutes her ‘space’, is established as the medium of women in this particular postcolonial nation – a medium in which they lack or are denied a centre.

Given my concern to plot translocal movement in relation to national belonging (or the lack thereof), it is important to note that Masvita’s rootless medium is far removed from the transitional spaces of the transnational migrant. By this I mean the migrant represented in postcolonial discourse as straddling countries in a state of inventive plurality. Masvita, like the masses of women whose situation she signifies, does not have the autonomy or resources that would allow this kind of multicultural plenitude and playfulness...
to be either achieved or expressed. She represents, after all, the nation suspended in a condition of negativity. Although some of her wanderings are putatively translocal, her experience queries the value of such cross-borderline links, the more so in that the novel identifies a transnationalised freedom with the widespread delight in the city at the availability of Ambi skin-lightening cream (WN 26–7).

Like Without a Name, The Stone Virgins moves between the poles of the city, Bulawayo, which it tenderly maps, and Kezi, ‘a rural enclave’ two hundred miles away, situated in the ‘other world’ formed by the sacred, tumbling rocks of the Matopo hills. In this novel, however, differently from Without a Name, the women characters are pictured as rooted within their environment, or as in a state of becoming so, whereas the men, in particular soldiers and former guerrillas, are adrift, bereft of meaning, constrained by the ‘ceiling’ of history (SV 74). As this might suggest, despite its cryptic encodings of its controversial subject matter, The Stone Virgins represents Vera’s most historically realist work to date and a new fictional departure.

To sketch the salient details of its historical background, the novel is set around 1982/83, some two years after independence, the time when rivalries between the two nationalist forces which had battled for control of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe’s ZANLA and Joshua Nkomo’s ZIPRA, once again flared into the open. The conflict drove some former ZIPRA guerrillas, like Vera’s brutalised, ‘mind-scalded’ Sibaso, formerly a cultural nationalist, now the Kezi woman Thenjiwe’s killer, back into the hills, this time no longer supported by local communities. For its part Mugabe’s government responded with the creation of a hit squad, the 5 Brigade, to crush Matabeleland’s dissidence. Brutal atrocities occurred, most of them perpetrated upon civilians, which are reflected in the novel in the destruction of Mahlatini and his store, Kezi’s hub of social interchange (SV 24–5). Rural settlements like Kezi, always ‘at the mercy of misfortune’, become, as the character Cephas observes, ‘naked cemeter[ies]’ (SV 26, 143).

As this context suggests, Vera is concerned throughout The Stone Virgins heavily to qualify the valorised meanings of ‘independence’, ‘nation’, ‘land’, by plunging her characters without apparent explanation into horrifying situations of civil conflict and physical torture. Even the shreds of idealism that in the earlier novel clung to these terms are obliterated. The mutilated Nonceba, Thenjiwe’s younger sister, alone survives the agonies inflicted upon the community. For the rest, the expectations of independence, with which Mahlatini the store-owner fully identified, are exposed as a useless dream that cannot give protection from killers who act in the name of the established national government. When Thenjiwe is decapitated by a killer who attacks her from behind, she incarnates the fate even of bold, self-possessed young women, even perhaps the confident female ex-combatants pictured on the store veranda, ‘the most
substantial evidence of survival there is, of courage, of struggle’ (SV 53). The former freedom-fighter Sibaso, sheltering in the stony hills, his own mind turned virtually to stone by his ‘voyage into tragic spaces’, his imagination ‘encumbered’, becomes her seemingly motiveless murderer as well as Nonceba’s assailant (SV 47, 74). As an authorial interjection inserted into one of his monologues puts it: ‘Independence, which took place only three years ago, has proved us a tenuous species, a continent which has succumbed to a violent wind, a country with land but no habitat. We are out of bounds in our own reality’ (SV 74). An independent history, which once seemed to hold out a bright promise, has betrayed people on all sides. Internal division has broken the nation apart.

Yet, as is predictable in Vera’s work, just as intimacy can signify both physical transport and the closeness of torture, so history, like the nation, like the city of Bulawayo itself, appears in contradictory guises. Nationalist history works with the heaviness of a killer’s hand, yet it may also have the ‘weightlessness’ (as in Kundera’s lightness) of a dead spider. When Sibaso returns by accident to the cultural nationalist text Feso that inspired his youthful dreams, the spider perfectly crushed between its pages embodies this weightlessness, this slightness and delicacy (SV 111). National independence may seem compromised, yet in the city independence allows Africans ‘to go . . . and leave, as they please’ (SV 9). The new flag of the new nation is soiled, yet ‘flaps’ freely in the wind (SV 154). Moreover, independence allows Cephas, Thenjiwe’s former lover, to bring her mutilated sister Nonceba to the city and establish for her an unthreatening, familial home at its very centre, where she can live while rebuilding her life, while receiving the medical treatment that will reconstruct her face.

As this might imply, in The Stone Virgins there is little that is more contradictory than the forms through which a national history is manifested. In so far as Vera habitually erases causal links between events, the violent irrationality of history that lays communities to waste expresses itself in particularly acute ways. At the same time, however, Cephas, who helps reconstitute Nonceba’s life, who seeks to retrieve the past, is significantly not only male but a historian, who interprets history positively, as reconstruction. He ‘works for the archives of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe’ (SV 163), his particular project to rebuild the great home or kraal, kwoBulawayo, of the great nineteenth-century chief Lobengula. As he himself urges: a ‘new nation needs to restore the past’ (SV 165). His archival work, too, leads him back to Kezi and reveals Nonceba’s plight. In this respect the process of national coming-into-being brings about regeneration as well as divisiveness.

For Yvonne Vera the heaviness of history’s contradictions falls upon women’s bodies. As is strongly implied in the close pairing of the sisters – Thenjiwe who is brutally killed, Nonceba who is maimed but survives – women
give expression to the nation's history in both its restorative and destructive
guises. The impacts of history violate and obliterate women, and exploit their
vulnerability (Thenjiwe, for example, chose to live unprotected and alone). Yet
the community may also ‘owe [women] a destiny’, where destiny signifies how
the ‘pattern and progress’ of community life is shaped (SV 54). As they rebuild
society, or simply remould their own lives, women themselves put into opera-
tion and identify with the restorative processes of history, as does Nonceba. It
is in this matter of choice that national embodiment by women in Vera, espe-
cially in this later work, differs fundamentally from the objectification of
women figures in earlier post-independence writing. Such choice, the power to
‘define the world differently’, is perhaps most fully expressed by those female
soldiers who hang out at Mahlatini’s store. Self-confident if ‘unquenchably’
saddened by their combat experience, they initially approach independence
circumspectly as ‘respite from war’, not as outright victory.26 They delay, too,
in removing their camouflage. They are idealised figures, certainly, but they are
also seen as less prone to sexual anxiety and delusion than the men in the com-
community, and they are not associated with any one particular locale. In spite, or
perhaps because, of how their own histories are ‘disturbed’ and fragmented,
they symbolise the fate of the entire country. They not only define the shape of
independence but are even able to identify themselves with the hope of a whole
‘broken continent’ (SV 49–55).

By drawing out these different suggestions of national identification and
translocal movement, I have tried to propose that Yvonne Vera neither repu-
diates the nation nor, even more radically, does she reject the idea that women’s
lives may stand as emblems for the fate of the nation. Writing in the context of
Zimbabwe’s history of independence struggle, women in her view can be the
interpreters of the nation’s destiny, just as their bodies provide an accurate
gauge of its (pre- or post-independence) condition. By contrast, transnational
networks are barely mentioned in The Stone Virgins other than where their cul-
tural fall-out in the form of African American jazz, or a wider-than-indigenous
variety of cut flowers on pavement stalls, extends the range of escapism and
fantasy available in the city’s streets. For Nonceba the survivor of history, all
fantasy is first to be nurtured within the sheltering space of her city flat, from
the window of which the fluttering national flag is visible.

In Arundhati Roy the contrast between the gods of the ‘small’ – the personal,
the domestic – as against those associated with bigger ‘things’ – national
history, social regulation, transnational enterprise, patriarchy – makes an
obvious if silent allusion to Jean-François Lyotard’s distinction between the grand and petit narratives of history.27 In The God of Small Things, a tale of
damaged lineages and dispossession, it is predictably in relation to the smaller,
peripheral spaces that the lives of women, children and dalits are plotted.28
Despite this, however, the ‘vast, violent . . . public turmoil of a nation’ keeps impinging: ‘Worse Things’ trivialise the small by contrast. 29

In brief, The God of Small Things tells the story of the twins Rahel and Estha’s implication in their cousin Sophie Mol’s death, and their subsequent lifetime of multiple loss (of speech, family, each other). Their story repeatedly circles round its focal event, delayed till the final chapter, of their mother Ammu’s doomed affair with the ‘Untouchable’, the carpenter Velutha. Virtually throughout, the ‘drifting’ adult Rahel, the ‘two-egg twin’ from whose point of view much of the action is narrated, feels emptied by her sorrow, trapped outside her own and the nation’s history (GST 15–19, 52). Like her divorcée mother an inhabitant of ‘penumbral shadows between two worlds’, Rahel negotiates her fragile subjectivity in repeated painful encounters with the unexpected and the interstitial, the ‘Unsafe Edge’ and ‘Blurry Ends’, of that which lies outside convention (GST 3, 44). ‘India’s a Free Country’, says her twin Estha with unconscious irony just before they set out on their fateful journey across the Meenachal River that will lead to their cousin’s drowning and their mother’s disgrace: it is the twins’ single direct reference to the country they live in (GST 197). 30

The small circle of the novel’s Syrian Christian family (self-enclosed like the surrounding community), with its Plymouth car and ‘tangerine’ radio, its bourgeois privileges and international economic and educational contacts, is, if marginal to the Indian nation, nevertheless comfortably plugged into the networks of an overarching ‘anglicised cultural imperialism’. 31 It was this very ‘neo-imperial imaginary’, along with the novel’s elliptical structures of enticement and delay, that no doubt made for its global marketability. 32 At the same time, however, the narrative maintains a critical watch on its possible collusion with transnational regimes of cultural value. As a paradigm of this watchfulness, the children’s forbidden playground, the multivalent ‘History House’, once the dwelling of Ayemenem’s own ‘Kurtz’ and called the ‘Heart of Darkness’, is said to signify ‘history’ (that is, ‘important’ European history) to the children precisely because they are locked out of it (GST 52–3). 33 It is the same building that, in the novel’s present, has been converted into a five-star hotel with, on display, the restored house of Kerala’s first Marxist Chief Minister (GST 67, 125–7). Here, too, abbreviated Kathakali performances are held for tourists – performances which do, however, help the traditional players to make ends meet. Inadvertent and/or forced complicity with global trade and commerce, these strongly contrasted images suggest, is all too inevitable in a world where both colonial and anti-colonial structures are converted into commodities, into a ‘toy history’.

The commercial and cosmopolitan complicities of Roy’s novel are thus offset both by its enunciatory resistances, as was seen, and by what Alex Tickell has called ‘the sophisticated debate over agency’ – relative to its transnational
but also national axes – which is conducted throughout. Beginning with Ammu’s comment, à propos of Brutus’s role in *Julius Caesar*, ‘you can’t trust anybody’, and – the unstated corollary – that there must always be someone to blame for a crisis (*GST 83*), *The God of Small Things* tirelessly worries at the problem of responsibility: the fact that it is the twins’ grand-aunt Baby Kochamma who betrays the lovers; that a terrified Estha is the one who identifies Velutha to the police. The central question, who does what to whom, which the novel repeatedly poses, is a further way of reflecting the broader metatextual question concerning the work’s possible global or transnational complicity back upon itself. Throughout, too, the individual and the community are positioned within criss-crossing causal webs of transnational as well as national interrelationship, which commit them to particular actions and choices. Bodies and desires, as in the repeated reference to the ‘Love Laws’, are strongly conceived as political. Local interdictions, the novel emphasises from the start, are the product of a long history of cultural encounter that has flowed across Ayemenem in successive waves (*GST 32–3*). Indicatively, although the national entity of India seems remote, the circumstances of the twins’ birth (during a blackout occasioned by the 1962 war), like the fate of the local Maoist Communist Party, are shaped by India’s cross-border interactions, in both these cases with China (*GST 40, 68*). It is in relation to such forces that ‘Estha and Rahel [learn] how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws’ (*GST 55*). As in *Vera*, the impact of history on the individual can wound as well as redeem; as in *Vera*, too, this redemptive quality is subtly interleaved with the restorative charge of a sentimental nationalism.

Roy’s sense that local needs are pressed by national and international demands, that small turmoils lock into larger ones, is more starkly articulated in her anti-globalisation polemical writing, collected as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), which reflects back on the role played by national history in her novel. Exposing the contradictory destructions inflicted by multinational corporations, and the postcolonial nation’s co-operation with these in the name of national pride, her non-fictional collection both probes the benefits of transnational linkups to the Indian national community, and sheds light on the emotional and imaginative make-up of her ideal Indian nation.

On the face of it, the *Algebra of Infinite Justice* essays seem as hostile to the nation as to, say, dam-building multinationals. Writing in 1998, appalled at how India’s nuclear capability was touted as a demonstration of national potency, Roy in ‘The end of imagination’ delivers a counter-blast, an assertion of women’s identity as situated outside any nation defined in chauvinistic terms. If protesting against the bomb, she writes, ‘is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I’m female . . .
Immigrants are welcome’ (AIF 19). The statement is of course strongly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s 1938 declaration that, given the domination of nation-state hierarchies by male professionals and masculine concepts of power, she wanted no part in them. In other of the essays, deploring the rise of fundamentalism and its association with the worst excesses of nationalism, Roy takes a similar line, but gives it a twist. She cynically notes that ‘the Greater Good of the Nation’ is defined as that which promotes multinational development, privatises natural resources and enriches the corporations involved. ‘At times there’s something so precise and mathematically chilling about nationalism’, she observes: that is, when it does its arithmetic with transnational markets, purchase orders and the lifting of import restrictions in mind (AIF 71, 118, 133–4).

Yet when Roy delights in India’s diversity and celebrates the Indian land as offering a counterpoint to all that she deplores, it is evident that she does retain an unmistakably national pride in her country. She appears to share the worry of Avtar Brah, among others, that transnationalism is so tightly associated with cognate concepts such as translocation, dislocation, displacement, that the words nation and location which it internally embeds can dissolve out of focus. Roy’s own India with its ‘fissures running vertically and horizontally’, and the Indian people with their capacity for tireless, poorly rewarded protest (AIF 77–81, 82), manifest to her the positive alternative not only to the monolithic nation, but, crucially, to the depredations inflicted by global capitalism. Giving vent to such sentiments, Roy like V era allows herself to countenance, even if mostly implicitly, a redefined nationalism. She holds up a feminised ‘India’, consistently addressed using the feminine pronoun reminiscent of Nehru’s writing, as an alternative to the cynical, transnationally networked, post-independence ‘Nation’. In a direct reference to The God of Small Things and its circumspection with regard to the ‘public turmoil of the nation’, she writes that the twenty-first century may demand the ‘dismantling of the Big’ – big bombs, dams, ideologies, heroes and, presumably, also nations – in favour of the small. ‘Perhaps right now, this very minute, there’s a small god up in heaven readying herself for us . . . It sounds finger-licking good to me’ (AIF 48–9). Yet at the same time she invokes a ‘we’ – of a people, a community, a nation reduced in stature – as the ground of solidarity from which protests may be mounted and anti-KFC jokes enjoyed (AIF 63). On occasion she allows herself to speak in resonantly nationalist terms: ‘this is my land, this is the dream to which the whole of me belongs, this is worth more to me than anything else in the world. We were not just fighting against a dam. We were fighting for a philosophy. For a world view’ (AIF 159). Presumably she means the Gandhian world-view of sustainable development and village co-operation, defended by the weapons of the weak, and vehemently opposed to the caste laws interdicted, too, in The God of Small Things.
‘To slow a nation, you break its people. You rob them of volition’ (AIF 121): it becomes increasingly more clear across the length of The Algebra of Infinite Justice that Roy, again like Vera, thinks strongly in terms of two different nations. On the one hand is the capitalised Nation, monolithic, chauvinist, neoliberal, revivalist, in cahoots with multinational companies and the World Bank, which she names the ‘transnational multignome’, the new Rumpelstiltskin, and reviles outright. Yet on the other hand there is a feminised India, the lower-case nation or people, defined relationally, in mainly familial terms, and from below – analogous with Vera’s restorative nation – which she is happy to reinstate (AIF 162). Certainly, as her own political activism suggests, this nation can be mobilised on behalf of minority groups, including women – groups disadvantaged both by tradition (the Love Laws) and by the transnationalism associated with globalised capital (the outsourcing of service industries, the relocation of multinational industries to the developing world). Significantly, however, this nation, too, is constituted in cross-border, translocal, even positively international ways (through activist networks, environmental causes, participation in the same biosphere). For Roy it would seem that the two conditions – nationalist loyalty and translocal connection – are interdependent, symbiotic. Such interdependence to her can work for both good and ill.

Conclusion

As my juxtaposition of Yvonne Vera alongside Arundhati Roy suggests, the two writers agree in their affirmation of small, private as well as larger public spaces as sites where women’s politics can be located. Importantly, however, the importance of these sites is qualified in relation to one another, such that something like a ‘constellation’ of spaces, of the woman’s nation as balanced against local and translocal links, crystallises into shape.37 In both their writing, home, such as it is (Nonceba’s flat, the Ayemenem family house), is seen as the intersection of different modes of inhabitation, the product of different narratives of history. And the nation – reclaimed rather than merely endured – is turned into one of its incarnations.

Both Arundhati Roy and Yvonne Vera therefore in their different ways calibrate the transnational with the national, and the other way about. Their texts pay attention to how transnational horizons and translocal journeys usefully disperse some of the more unitary and restrictive definitions of the nation and fragment its enclosing borders. Neither attempts anything resembling a national epic or allegory, such as authored by male writers from Mungoshi to Chinodya, from Rushdie through to Ghosh. But they do interestingly explore the impact of the nation or postcolony on women by taking the risk of representing women’s stories as synonymous with the nation’s. This is even though
the narrative modes they adopt – of the confession, of the collage of recovered memory – are immediately more modest, private, hidden, intimate, than those of the conventional national story.

Both writers point out that internal quasi-/national dissent as well as transnational forces can disrupt homogeneous national spaces and identities (to the extent indeed that it may in certain instances make more sense to speak of the *postcolony* than the nation in relation to their work). In *Without a Name*, Masvita’s psychic dispossession is a function of nationalist conflict as well as of colonial displacement. In Roy, by contrast, the adult Rahel’s sense of being removed from her history is partly occasioned by changes the global tourism industry has brought to Ayemenem. In this case, in the face of transnational incursions, the local provides a site where memory can be regrouped and family relationships restored. Yet for both writers the nation, too, reclaimed for women as a differential space, as has been seen, can become a ground on which their subjectivity – relational, multiply located – may be expressed; a political vantage point from which demands for social justice and equality can be voiced.

By keeping the possibility of a liberatory or women’s nation alive, but without sacrificing relationality, writers such as Vera and Roy reject the rhetoric of negativity through which the nation is almost always conventionally addressed in a postcolonial discourse that privileges diasporic border crossings, dialogic migrancy, and so on. Qualifying the transnational with the translocal and the national, their work queries definitions of the postcolonial not only as normatively transnational, but, by the same token, as adequately subversive of the global hegemonies that it itself underpins. In plainer terms, by exploring the different modes through which resistance, identity and home may be expressed, their novels deconstruct the one-dimensional equation of the postcolonial and the transnational, and probe its politics also. Work like theirs helps frame the question: if the postcolonial novel is exclusively viewed as participating in the transnational flows of a globalised world, does it not then merely furnish an acceptable cultural front for neoliberal market forces?

Notes


4 For a more extensive critical commentary on Tagore’s internationalism as in fact nationalist in its make-up, see Ashis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*: 


7 See Inderpal Grewal, Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).


12 As Jon Mee, ‘After midnight: the Indian novel in English of the 80s and 90s’, Postcolonial Studies, 1:1 (April 1998), 127–41, puts it, women writers strive to ‘have their say’ about who constitutes the nation. See in particular pp. 132 and 134.

13 Amit Chaudhuri, ‘What the postcolonial Indian novel means to the west’, TLS, 5031 (3 September 1999), 5–6. On Indian writing as influenced by colonial and cosmopolitan ‘transactions’, see also Harish Trivedi, Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Tabish Khair, Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).


17 Rosemary M. George, The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-century Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), explores the re-siting of the concept of home, and indeed of critical theories themselves as sites for reconceptualising home. Following Chandra Mohanty’s injunction to relocate concepts of the self and belonging away from the west, George offers home,
in the lower case, as, in her terms, a flexible, inclusive, diversified alternative to capitalised 'Home', that is to say, identity conceived in a western, national framework.


19 The point is made by Terence Ranger in his essay on the figuration of history in the novel: “‘History has its ceiling’: the pressures of the past in *The Stone Virgins*’, in Muponde and Taruvinga (eds), *Sign and Taboo*, pp. 203–16.

20 See Meg Samuelson, ‘Re-membering the body: rape and recovery’, in Muponde and Taruvinga (eds), *Sign and Taboo*, pp. 93–100.

21 See Jane Bryce, ‘Interview with Yvonne Vera, 1 August 2000’, in Muponde and Taruvinga (eds), *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.


25 On Vera’s citation of Kundera, see Samuelson, ‘Re-membering the body’, p. 94.


30 As Chaudhuri, ‘What the postcolonial Indian novel means’, pp. 14–15, says, Indian writers, especially perhaps writers in the vernacular or *bhasha*, ‘do not necessarily write about “India” or a national narrative . . . but about cultures and localities that are both situated in, and disperse the idea of, the nation’.

31 See Khair, *Babu Fictions*, pp. 142–3.


33 In interview Roy has elucidated that the ‘Heart of Darkness’ reference, even while something of a ‘laughing’ throwaway, draws attention to the stories of those who live in darkness, who are meant to have no stories. See Praveen Swami, ‘When you


36 Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (London: Flamingo, 2002). Page references will be quoted in the text together with the abbreviation *AIF*.

37 As Nana Wilson-Tagoe, ‘History, gender and the problem of representation’, in Muponde and Taruvinga (eds), *Sign and Taboo*, pp. 155–78, too, emphasises, the individual’s experience of history is transformed in relation to changes in the collective’s sense of history, and *vice versa*. 

206

*Stories of women*