A Martyrology of the Abject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* enjoys tremendous international success but perhaps more significantly, it touches individual readers deeply; many find it profound beyond its poetics. This essay explores the question of how it is that the novel has such power; it advances the suggestion that its literary power stems from a particular narrative deployment of the abject and the traumatic. The narrative of *The God of Small Things* exhibits the general characteristics of trauma, which may be defined as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (Caruth 4). Cathy Caruth also notes the common "delay or incompletion in knowing" that is often present in trauma (5). These characteristics of trauma are found in the content of Roy's novel but gain further force and significance by being repeated in its narrative structure. Events, especially the most traumatic ones, are referred to over and over again. Specific details (such as "the smell of old roses" [14 and *passim*]) and phrases ("Orangedrink, Lemondrink Man" [98 and *passim*]) are repeated; related dreams (like Rahel's of Ammu [214]) are recounted; scenes are iterated and reiterated, fragmentally, in various stages of completion, but always "absolutely *true* to the event" (Caruth 5). The traumatic structure of the narrative forces readers to experience the trauma of the abject as if they are already subject to it.[1]

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony* situates contemporary trauma studies at the interstices of literature, psychoanalysis, and history; however, in it, the role of the abject, and its close relation to trauma, as well as to literature, psychoanalysis and history, is under-theorized.[2] The abject is everything that the human body excretes in order to live, all that might endanger our lives should we touch or ingest it; it is the things we must not do in order to be proper subjects in our societies. In exploring the role of the abject, both Julia Kristeva and, following her lead, Anne McClintock, have integrated aspects of Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* and Freudian concepts to move towards a social interpretation of psychoanalytic theories[3] that can be applied to modern imperialist and contemporary societies (McClintock 71-72). As Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror*, "leaving aside the question of the priority of one over the other (the social does not represent the subjective any more than the subjective represents the social), I shall posit that they both follow the same logic, with no other goal than the survival of both group and subject" (68). Thus, the abject is active not only in, for example, excrement, but also in the social cast(e)ing out of groups, such as Untouchables in the context of Roy's Kerala. That the removal of bodily wastes is, historically, work that can only be performed by Untouchables reinforces the aptness of the social application of abjection theory to *The God of Small Things*, a novel that concerns itself with the politics of caste.

The character of Velutha most particularly marks the intersection of the abject and trauma within the novel, not only because his body becomes the site of the trauma that permeates the novel, but because his body, as the body of an Untouchable, also represents the socially abject. Kristeva argues that "literature is [abjection's] privileged signifier [...] literature as such, represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses" (208). She further claims that literature may be "seen as taking the place of the sacred" and that because it "decks itself out in the sacred power of horror, literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject." Roy's *The God of Small Things* does unveil the abject for

readers; however, in the spirit of testimony, the novel also implicitly calls for resistance to a social institution that it presents as unjust. The transformation of the literary into the sacred, accomplished through unveiling the abject, is what makes the novel uncannily meaningful to readers as it evokes something like religious testimony. The religious and the abject are mutually constitutive, which may account for the righteous "thrill" of horror and literature's ability to both disturb and uplift. Abjection is that which is cast out from order to obtain order; it "is the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies" (209). *The God of Small Things* takes our breath away because it reveals the social abyss that is papered over by convention.

Felman approaches similar territory in describing literature as a kind of testimony wherein the author becomes "the one who [...] *witnesses*, but also, the one who *begets*, the truth, through the speech process of the testimony" (16). She argues that "psychoanalysis and literature have come both to contaminate and to enrich each other [...] as primarily *events of speech*, [...] as a mode of *truth's realization* beyond what is available as statement" (15). Thus, "testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times—our relation to the traumas of contemporary history" (5). This analysis intersects with Kristeva's contention that it is the abject that brings literature into the realm of the sacred to make trauma the most natural subject of contemporary literature because to experience the abject is always, to some extent, traumatic. Literature thus connects trauma and the abject to create testimony, intertextual acts of (religious) witnessing, performed by authors and addressed to a laity of readers.

Abjection and trauma are strangely similar in how intractable each is to solid definition; each is oddly fluid, slippery, in motion. Kristeva argues that the abject has no object (1-2), which is similar to Caruth's contention that there is no definable external determinant for trauma (4). This paper suggests that exposure to the abject could be such an external determinant, that trauma is a response to the abject and that the degree of trauma experienced is in direct proportion to the degree of

abjection experienced, a degree which is always dependent on context, both personal and social. Traumatic and abject states are also potent sources of discursive power, partially because they are not exhausted through quotidian utterance, largely due to the difficulty individuals experience in attempting to narrate trauma.

Although trauma and the abject cross in Velutha, *The God of Small Things* is a novel of multiple traumas, which are induced by experiences of the abject that are forced upon several of the least powerful members of society, a strategy that is most apparent when the subject of trauma is a naïve character such as the child, Estha. The sexual abuse of Estha by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man prepares him (and readers) for the later trauma caused by his observation of the police attack on Velutha. Both are experiences of the abject; both are associated with s(t)icky sweetness.[4] "Stickysweet lemon bubbles of the drink he couldn't drink" are associated with the "wet and hot and sticky [...] White egg white. Quarterboiled" of the abuser's ejaculate on Estha's hand (99). In an impulse that demonstrates the abject nature of this particular trauma, Estha "held his sticky Other Hand away from his body. It wasn't supposed to touch anything" (100). Not surprisingly, Estha is soon "feeling vomity" (102). The abjectness of certain food items or bodily wastes is the most common and elementary form of the abject and "spasms and vomiting [are responses] that protect" the subject (Kristeva 2). Kristeva connects these elementary aspects of the abject with less tangible examples of psychological and social abjectness: "the shame of compromise [...] treachery." The trauma of sexual abuse often involves both aspects because it is bound up with the betrayal of the child's trust in the adult and the treachery of, in this case, Estha's own painfully learned social politeness, which functions to make him unwillingly complicit. These socially and psychologically "sickening" feelings, no less than the physical imposition of another's body and bodily fluids, are implicated in the abject.

If misplaced ejaculate is abject, a corpse is much more so. "The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything"; it shows what we "permanently thrust aside in order

to live" (3). Rahel and Estha, Ammu's fraternal twins, are forced to watch "history's henchmen" kick and beat Velutha insensible (292). If the corpse is the epitome of the abject, then arguably, watching the violent and deliberate transformation of a known and beloved "mindful body" (Strathern 4) into a near-corpse, whose bones and flesh have been transposed and whose inside-belonging blood, urine, and faeces are now not belonging, outside, is traumatic to the degree that it is abject. The children's minds fixate on inessentials:

> Lesson Number One:
> *Blood barely shows on a Black Man.* (Dum dum)
> And
> Lesson Number Two:
> *It smells though,*
> *Sicksweet.*
> *Like old roses on a breeze.* (Dum dum) (293)

The vocabulary of the "Lessons" in trauma recall the "stickysweet" of Estha's earlier abuse. The narrative style reflects the trauma, forcing poetic structure into the prose, a structure that echoes the "poem" of masturbation that signals the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man experience (99).

After the children and Velutha are brought to the police station, Inspector Thomas Mathew recognizes in the children's "growing incoherence [...] dilated pupils [...] the human mind's escape valve [...] its way of managing trauma" (297-98). They are still in this state when Baby Kochamma convinces them that, unless they lie and say that Velutha abducted them, they and their mother will go to "three different jails" (301). She gives them the choice: Velutha or Ammu. In another repetition of the pattern of Estha's abuse, they are forced to be complicit within the traumatic situation. Both must agree that Velutha abducted them but Estha, alone, must accompany the Inspector to the lock-up which holds the battered body that is Velutha. There, he must identify and betray him while "the smell of shit made him retch [...]

blood spilled from [Velutha's] skull like a secret [...] a pool of urine spreading from him" (303). This excess of the abject, this killing, is the trauma that the narrative of *The God of Small Things* repeatedly approaches and withdraws from, until Roy can "allow the telling of the trauma to proceed and to reach its testimonial resolution" (Felman xvii). The trauma spreads, as if in ripples, from the pools of urine, of blood, that pour from Velutha's body. It is that which the author "begets" and to which she bears witness.

On a simple level, the trauma may be read as a result of the sexual affair between Ammu and Velutha. This is Aijaz Ahmad's reading, which characterizes the novel as reproducing a conventional tale "about sexuality as the final realm of both Pleasure and of Truth," which is distinguished by "the privatisation of both pleasure and politics, [...] 'phallic sexuality,' [... where the] partners in it transgress such boundaries as those of class and caste" (104). While this criticism has its modicum of truth (the sexuality *is* somewhat conventionally phallic and clearly transgressive), its general thrust is not satisfying: it misrepresents the social and political nature of the novel. Ahmad complains that "in its deep structure this discourse of Pleasure is also profoundly political, precisely in the sense that in depicting the erotic as Truth it also dismisses the actually constituted field of politics as either irrelevant or a zone of bad faith," which is an indication that his concern is not really the phallic or the transgressive aspects of the affair but rather what he interprets as its depoliticizing effect. This view addresses Ahmad's perception of politics more than it does the actual politics of the novel. Brinda Bose responds by pointing out that his definition of politics is too narrow and that in order "to read [Roy's] novel *politically* 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" (68).

Bose's argument is compelling but I would argue that *The God of Small Things* is an even stronger and more socially based testimony than her emphasis on "interpersonal relations" suggests. If it is the traumatizing

effect of the abject from which the novel draws its strength, then the circumstances that combine to produce that traumatizing act are key indicators of novelistic concerns. It is surely not narrative accident that the State-sanctioned murder of Velutha is only enabled through a complex interaction of individuals who represent the significant levels of Keralanian society: government (represented by the Communist Party leader); State enforcement (represented by the police); and the family (represented by Vellya Paapen and Baby Kochamma). Haunting all of these is the distorting trace of colonialism. These are the forces, which neatly represent Louis Althusser's Repressive State Apparatus (government, police) and Ideological State Apparatus (colonialism and family) (136-37), forces that also interact to hasten Ammu's death.

Sophie Mol is the hybrid daughter of the Englishwoman, Margaret, and the Rhodes Scholar Indian, Chacko; her childhood death in India, which provokes panic in postcolonial Kerala, is only one of the many marks of British Imperialism that haunt the novel. She is also only one instance of hybridity. The twins themselves are "half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry," comments Baby Kochamma, herself the unrequited lover of an Irish priest, a convert to Roman Catholicism, and a failed nun (44). "They all crossed into forbidden territory. [...] this difficulty their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question," which they encounter in marketing their banana jam (31). Hybridity, the crossing of cultures, is foregrounded in the novel as an inevitable result of history, as natural as Christianity seeping "into Kerala like tea from a teabag" (33). Cécile Oumhani claims that it is "the idea of hybridity [that] engenders the primal fear that unleashes violence against Velutha" (85). Hybridity (and reaction to it) may be a distorting factor equal to the lingering effects of British Imperialism since *The God of Small Things* integrates British colonialism into a history in which Southern India is traumatized by a succession of invader-rulers that extend from the Hindu "conquest of Calicut" through the Portuguese and Dutch to the British. The novel takes a very long view—a specifically social view: its testimony "really began in the days when the

Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much (33)."

The God of Small Things is not, as Ahmad claims, simply "a family chronicle" (105); it is a chronicle of a society, a nation; of "an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it. History in live performance" (Roy *God* 293). It is a history traumatized by colonialism, whose effects are witnessed by the novel as it begets characters. This is particularly obvious in the "British [...] shit-wiper" (50), Pappachi, the "Imperial Entomologist" (48), whose frustrated subalternity is violently visited upon his wife, Mammachi, and their child, Ammu, in whom he instills "the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (44). The character of Baby Kochamma, arguably the catalyst that precipitates dangerous ingredients into bloody trauma, the one who "unspooled" the Terror (244), is also thoroughly interpellated and twisted, first by "Anglophilia" (54ff), and then by global (American) culture, which she pulls into her heart via the satellite dish that feeds her TV (279-81). However, "to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it" (32); more than India's postcoloniality creates the abject in the "History House" (290), which is not only the colonial "Heart of Darkness" of Joseph Conrad but also the site of Roy's exploration of the "Darkness," not for "White Men, the people who are scared of the Heart of Darkness," but for "the people who live in it" (Roy "Interview" 107).

Ahmad's emotional defence of communism leads him to underestimate the significance of the social and political statements in *The God of Small Things*. It also leads him to what can only be called an "interested" reading of one of "the people who live in" Kerala, Comrade Pillai. His assertion 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," as well as being open to question in and of itself, contains several misreadings (105). Ahmad assumes a harshness towards Pillai that is not supported by the narrative: Pillai doesn't "actively conspire" but conspires passively; he "omitted to mention that Velutha was a member of the

Communist Party, or that Velutha had knocked on his door late the previous night, which made [him] the last person to have seen Velutha before he disappeared" (Roy *God* 248). Roy's text explicitly states that "he did not plan the course of events" (266). Pillai's passive complicity is entirely in keeping with his character as a pragmatist, "essentially a political man. A professional omletteer" (15); surely Ahmad is aware that every political party or faction, especially successful ones, have their "omletteers." This scene enacts the classic relation between politicians and the men (in this case, police officers) who act on their behalf, those who together embody the Repressive State Apparatus. They "understood each other perfectly"; they knew how the world worked because "*they* worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine" (248).

Furthermore, Roy deliberately creates a situation where it is clear that Velutha, far from being a "well-respected [union] member," is rather a resented member, one whose presence at the factory is posing a problem for Comrade Pillai (who is not a union leader, as Ahmad states, but a Party leader who is a union organizer) with the "Touchable" factory workers because, "according to them, Paravans were not *meant* to be carpenters" (74). This factory problem is complicated by Velutha's active Party member status. He cannot be a recognized and useful ally for Pillai because he is an (unpopular) Untouchable worker; yet, he cannot be ignored because he is also the only card-holding member at the factory (115). Thus, it is politically expedient for K. N. M. Pillai to present no impediment to any action that might remove Velutha from his jurisdiction, despite Velutha's midnight hour appeal for his help. In the novel, Velutha's red flag contrasts with Pillai's "flag that fluttered on the roof [...] limp and old [... whose] red had bled away" (15). Velutha represents the more radical revolutionary impetus: the red that "bled away" from Pillai's flag may be imagined as the blood of Velutha, shed during his in-custody murder.

The action that Pillai does not prevent destroys Velutha immediately and destroys Ammu gradually—it also scars the twins deeply. These are not, however, as Ahmad claims, examples of "private experience" (103);

they are experiences of the body politic that are fictionalized and embodied in individual characters. Roy signals the political nature of the context of the erotic relation between Ammu and Velutha through frequent reference to "the Terror" (38 and *passim*) at the traumatic centre of *The God of Small Things*. This appellation implicitly compares the horror of the novel to the horror attendant on the French Revolution; the pairing of the two ideas invests the abject of Roy's narrative with an inescapably political reference. Perhaps *Les Misérables* of Kerala are the Untouchables, the transgressive women, the traumatized children. Velutha is killed, not simply as most critics imply, because he becomes a lover of Ammu, a Touchable, nor simply because he, himself, is an Untouchable, but rather because he is also a transgressive worker and a politically transgressive (perhaps Naxilite) Untouchable. His death might have been averted if he were not a political liability to Comrade Pillai. The immediate cause for his beating (from the perspective of the State, which is acting on a false report from Baby Kochamma) is that he has threatened sexual assault to a Touchable woman and abducted her children. Hostility towards suspected kidnappers and pedophiles does not, alone, explain the State response; it is his status as the abject of society, an obtrusive outcast(e), that authorizes the scientific beating that he receives:[5] "if they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature—had been severed long ago" (293). Roy stresses the importance of the policemen's status as Touchable men, men who are playing "touchable games [... with] Touchable cunning" (291). They have "responsibility for the Touchable Future on their thin but able shoulders."[6] Revisiting other elements of the novel unveils further unpleasant connections. Although most pedophiles are heterosexual, Roy draws the reader's attention to the "Orangedrink Lemondrink Man's [...] thumbnail [which] was long like a woman's" (99); and observes that "he had an air hostess's heart trapped in a bear's body" (106), which seems to draw on stereotypes of gay men. Furthermore, the colonizer is also coded as homosexual: "Kari Saipu [...] who captured

dreams and redreamed them" (190), is the ghost of an "Englishman who had 'gone native' [... and] had shot himself [...] when his young lover's parents had taken the boy away from him" (51). Homosexuality, which is otherwise completely absent from the novel, is thus implicated with the identified perpetrators of social and personal trauma: British Imperialism, the State, and child abuse. Such an indirectly homophobic stance cannot help but blur the lines of responsibility; it mars an otherwise socially progressive novel. The narrative repetition of "Touchable" is an indication that this is where the "*mystery*" lies, not, as Ahmad disparagingly claims, in Ammu and Velutha as "pure embodiments of desire" but in the blood that runs from Velutha's skull "like a secret," the abject fluid that reveals his biological oneness with his torturers even as their ideology keeps that knowledge from them (105).

The slow and deliberate beating of Velutha is shocking to readers in its economic coldness, which, particularly in the context of trauma and testimony, is evocative of the horror of the holocaust and its scientific attempt at genocide. As Kristeva observes in *Powers of Horror*, "the abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things" (4). Although Roy has fictionalized her social concerns (which are based in obviously different social conditions), there is a similarity in the way the scientific rationalism of the policemen is placed in the service of violent repression and juxtaposed with childhood innocence. The policemen act "with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria" (293). Later they bury, steal, and destroy the children's toys: "the inflatable goose. The Qantas koala" (295). These may be read as signs of innocence—worldly innocence, the children's innocence, and, in a juridical sense, perhaps proof of Velutha's innocence. The policemen are the "Servants of the State" (288) and their actions are the State response to its abject, a response to the dangerous border that threatens social life, a response which is, and is meant to be, precisely, an ordering of the chaotic:

> Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear—civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness. Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify. Men's Need's [...] Structure. Order. Complete monopoly. It was human history, masquerading as God's Purpose, revealing herself to an under-age audience. (292-93)

Neither the colonial History House (the ground on which both the loving and the beating occur), nor Comrade Pillai's self-interest, nor the State's desire for order could have produced, however, the horror that "blue-lipped and dinner-plate-eyed" Estha and Rahel watch, without the generative actions of the families of Ammu and Velutha (292). Although Roy exculpates Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father, as "an old Paravan, who had seen the Walking Backwards days, torn between Loyalty and Love" (242), as a man who didn't understand "his part in History's Plans" (190), it is nevertheless his betrayal of his son's transgression, "*his* tears that set the Terror rolling." In grim foreshadowing, he even offers to kill his son (75). Drunkenly, abjectly, "weeping" and "retching" (and fearing that if he doesn't, others will), he tells Mammachi of the affair between his son and her daughter (242). Yet, Vellya Paapen's narrative also reaches for the sublime, which haunts the edges of the abject (Kristeva 11), in his illumination that "the lovers [...] sprung from his loins and hers [...] had made the unthinkable thinkable" (242).

But if the generation of Ammu and Velutha join to make the Untouchable touchable, the families of the previous generation combine to summon State violence to that union. Unlike Comrade Pillai, Baby Kochamma does actively conspire to remove Velutha; it is she who files the false report on which Inspector Thomas Mathew acts. Even so, "it wasn't entirely their fault" (244), since Mathews doesn't act without the safeguard of consulting Pillai. Unfortunately, that failsafe action only protects Pillai while further exposing Velutha to law and order.

Order requires active policing; social life, like biological life, is a movement away from natural entropy. It requires energy to maintain existing order but much more energy to create new order. In this respect, it is interesting that Douglas contends that "there is energy in [society's] margins and unstructured areas" (114). This is the same energy that Kristeva claims inheres in the abject: "we may call it a border," she writes (9). Douglas also argues that "the body [can be] a symbol of society" (115). The making of the bond between the mindful bodies of Ammu and Velutha releases this energy of the borders to make "the unthinkable thinkable"; however, the energy that allows this to happen, from a narrative point of view, is drawn from the realms of the abject, both from its role as the border of the physical body and the socially constructed self, and from its role as the border of society proper. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy taps into the energy of borders to create a work of literature that invokes the sacred to testify to the unjust deployment of bodies in the current social order, and to, implicitly, transmit energy to movements to re-order social life. It is easier to relate to inhumanity writ small, which is the strength of literature in dealing with what Felman calls "the traumas of contemporary history" (5). The subjectivized story of caste in Kerala does not propose a solution but rather bears witness to the social trauma inherent in the presence of the socially abject, Untouchable caste.

The trace of colonialism in India's postcolonial situation complicates the possibilities of resolution. In *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee theorizes that evolving nationalism in India has required Indians to develop a politics that is split between inner and outer, material and spiritual (6-10ff). In his view, it was acceptable to emergent nationalists to accept material aspects of the colonizing Western culture, provided that Indians held firmly to their own traditions in the inner, spiritual realm. Similarly, Lata Mani argues that "the concept of tradition is reconstituted in the nineteenth century, that women and scripture are the terms of its articulation and that this development is specifically colonial" (113). Despite the emphasis that Indian nationalism has on the inner and spiritual facet of Indian life, the colonially

privileged focus on written "tradition" creates particular problems for the material bodies of women and Untouchables. Moreover, the scriptural prescriptions relied on by the colonist jurist, because they were textually based and therefore fixed, tended to be less flexible than local interpretations of tradition, which evolved over time and self-adjusted to local conditions. Thus traditional functions, though defined as spiritual, nevertheless become determinant ideologies that attach to bodies. As Chatterjee points out, "caste attaches to the body, not to the soul" (194). The two related ideologies (of gender and caste) naturally impinge on each other. Douglas notes that caste membership is determined through the mother and thus "female purity is carefully guarded and a woman who is known to have had sexual intercourse with a man of lower caste is brutally punished. Male sexual purity does not carry this responsibility. Hence male promiscuity is a lighter matter" (125). Therefore, in Roy's novel, readers see deadly penury and banishment for Ammu and a special door for Chacko's "Men's Needs" (160).

Chatterjee examines Dipankar Gupta's determination that "hierarchy is a property that does not belong to the essence of caste, and [...] where hierarchy exists it is not purity/pollution that is the necessary criterion" (179). Although he finds Gupta's particular formulation of the argument unconvincing, he suggests using the argument of variable caste ideologies in challenging the purity/pollution binary approach to caste. His desire is for an immanent approach from which to critique caste, one not contaminated by scholarly "Orientalism," which Edward Said defines in *Orientalism* as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience," as opposed to approaching the Orient on its own terms (1). Despite Chatterjee's academic argument, which has obvious merit, the families and the events chronicled in *The God of Small Things* problematize caste in a manner that assumes that the Love Laws are, in fact, purity laws where "physical crossing of the social barrier is treated as a dangerous pollution" (Douglas 139). In one representative example, readers learn that, in Mammachi's time, Paravans had to cover their

mouths when they spoke "to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed" (71).

Douglas discusses the difference between a purity rule and a moral rule: "pollution rules, by contrast with moral rules are unequivocal. [...] the only material question is whether a forbidden contact has taken place or not" (130). The contact between Ammu and Velutha is not debated in any of its points; within the novel it simply attracts events that combine to bring down the Terror. It appears that "these are pollution powers which inhere in the structure of ideas itself and which punish a [...] joining of that which should be separate" (113). In their case, once the transgression is known, all the surrounding disasters are attributed, wrongly and symbolically, to that contact, despite the factors actually responsible. This kind of pollution danger is "a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined" (113), which definition is the purpose of caste and gender strictures.

Mammachi responds to the "idea" of Ammu's transgression with the "vomity" reaction that is typically induced by contact with pollution, which, by definition, is abject: "she imagined it in vivid detail: a Paravan's coarse black hand on her daughter's breast. [...] *Like animals*, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. [... Ammu] had defiled generations of breeding" (244). The visceral reaction points to pollution as its trigger. Regardless of whether Roy's assumptions are correct, the question to be resolved, which is not addressed by Roy[7] (or this paper), is that raised by Chatterjee, which is how to develop "concrete forms of democratic community that are based neither on the principle of hierarchy nor on those of bourgeois equality" and that recognize the universal need of human societies to unify both "separateness and dependence" in its population (198). That is the task for academics and the body politic; the task for the writing body is to make the social situation, as she sees it, meaningful to readers. The question for the writer is, "How can she witness and bring energy to the issue?" I argue that Roy uses the abject, as border and margin, as the resource for this energy; the trauma that results is both the basis and the form of its witnessing.

The role of sin (or transgression) in the context of abjection is useful in examining how Roy's characters are able to present the issue of caste in such a compelling manner. Kristeva argues that "sin is subjectified abjection [...] through willful [sic] nonobservance of the rule" (128). Interestingly, from the standpoint of literature, she also claims that "sin as action—as action stemming from will and judgement—is what definitively integrates abjection into logic and language" (128-29). Roy begets characters who choose to "sin," who wilfully transgress the Love Laws, in a move that doubly concentrates a subjective (subjectified into character and therefore accessible) abjection in the heart of her story. Abjection is integrated into language through the action of sin (the act of transgression alone) but it is also present because the transgression intimately involves the socially abject body of the outcast(e), Velutha. The joining of these abjects "disturbs identity, system, order [... and] does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4).

Velutha himself is a site for the abject on a number of levels besides being an Untouchable, someone not part of society and yet there; an absent presence that is symptomatic of the abject.[8] His name alone is contradictory: although Velutha means white, it was given to him because "he was so black" (70). "Abjection is above all ambiguity" because to be ambiguous is to be borderline, in a state of hybridity (Kristeva 9). His father fears for Velutha's attitude, which is also anomalous in a Paravan: his "lack of hesitation," his "unwarranted assurance"; qualities "desirable, in Touchables" but insolent, obtrusive, in an Untouchable (Roy *God* 73). Most powerfully, Velutha may be read as the abject which founds Christianity—the martyred Christ-figure. He, too, is a poor carpenter who is betrayed, denied, and finally killed by authorities in a most abject manner. On one level, Velutha dies for his deliberately chosen "sin" but, symbolically, he, too, dies for (because of) the sins of the world, one of which, *The God of Small Things* implies, is the caste system.

One martyr might be thought sufficient; however, Ammu's death, and the spreading of the trauma (and the stain of the abject) to the other major characters, underlines Roy's implicit belief that the caste

system has a pervasive negative effect on society. Ammu's life was forfeit before the affair or Velutha's death: "in the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that, for her, life had been lived. She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man" (38). That she had had only one chance demonstrates the extent to which her female embodiment restricts her. After leaving her intercommunity marriage, which did not have her parents' approval, she returns to her natal family home, in which she has "no position," to live "the fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (44-5). Ammu retains, however, something of the rebelliousness that induced her to leave Ayemenem in the first place. Ammu's family senses the hybridity and the consequent danger within Ammu since "she lived in the penumbral shadows between two worlds [...] a woman that they had already damned [...] had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous" (44). When her daughter sees "Velutha marching with a red flag. In a white shirt and mundu with angry veins in his neck," Velutha ducks away, and Ammu disciplines Rahel for attracting the crowd of marchers but perhaps also for endangering the Untouchable who made and brought her presents during her unhappy teen years (68-9).

Velutha, too, had been away[9] and comes back a member of the communist party, a member prepared to march for improvements in Untouchable lives. Ammu's attraction to his "swimmer-carpenter's body" is coeval with her hope that "under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (167). The two are transgressive and are counted among the socially abject separately before they join their rage and love in an act that resonates, as Ahmad points out, very differently in India than it does in the West. Ahmad mentions the Keralanian gentleman who sues Roy, claiming that she "authored a pornographic book" whereas, for Ahmad, "the problem with [her] handling of sexuality is [...] that it is so thoroughly conventional" (104). Roy's handling of the sex scenes is conventional, in a Lawrentian sort of way;[10] however, I would argue for the appropriateness of this narrative style. The more conventional aspects of a novel are, usually, the places where readers, as

well as authors, are allowed to rest a little; it is not the conventionally written portion of a book that intends to arrest readers. Although the situation is complicated by the presence of an international audience for *The God of Small Things*, the relatively conventional treatment of the sexual activity itself suggests that it is not to the sex *per se* that the novelist wishes to draw readerly attention. What is not conventionally handled is the narrative of the abject, the trauma that spreads, which emphasizes the *results* of abuse, intimidations, and murder, the high cost of caste. It is this which, in a writerly way, demands close attention from readers.

The result of the intensification of abjection that the union of Ammu and Velutha (bodies that the communists have not freed from material social constraints) embodies is trauma. The trauma, the abjection that Velutha becomes, however, is not contained by his death, despite the best efforts of the "Servants of the State" (288) or their Inspector to "instill order into a world gone wrong" (246). Ammu is dispossessed of Estha, who is "Returned" (12) to his father; of Rahel, who is sent to boarding schools and stays with Chacko because Ammu cannot support her financially; and of her moral, but not legally recognized, share of the family pickle factory, house, and wealth. Rahel's dream of Ammu and Chacko, as well as recalling the symptoms of trauma, is symbolically accurate: "a fat man, faceless, kneeling beside a woman's corpse. Hacking its hair off. Breaking every bone in its body" (214). The hair, symbol of the woman punished because of sexual transgression, recalls the abjecting discourse of the police inspector (246), who calls Ammu "veshya [prostitute]" (10), a term and fate that haunts Ammu throughout her descent into poverty and illness. It is the implacability of the forces ranged against her that breaks her, makes her cry, makes her accuse herself of Velutha's death. In contradistinction to Ahmad, Bose proposes, tentatively, that "perhaps Ammu's death is in itself something of a political statement" (62).

I argue that Bose's tentativeness is misplaced and that Ahmad falls prey to the very error of which he accuses Roy. His criticism, especially in the matter of Ammu's death, is entirely based on the character as an

isolated individual ("a woman of great grit" [106]), which completely ignores her very well articulated social circumstances. His assertion that Ammu wastes "herself away into an unnecessary death, [which] is utterly contrived by the author" ignores the social reality that he himself subsequently describes, namely that her brother Chacko's rage "is made invincible through the power of property which he owns, against a divorced, defenceless sister who lacks rights of proprietorship in the home of her natal family" (108). A more astute observation would be that Ammu wastes away, necessarily, due to poverty, inadequate preparation for an independent life, and ill health that is likely consequent on the first two conditions. Personal "grit" is insufficient against foundational social oppression; to suggest that it ought to have been sufficient is to suggest that Roy pens a Western hero who would be much more conventional than the novel's descriptions of sex. "Grit" cannot win over the lack of legal standing or the threats of the Repressive State Apparatus: when Inspector Thomas Mathew "tapped [Ammu's] breasts with his baton, it was not a policeman's spontaneous brutishness. [...] he knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her" (246).

Her death, no less than that of Velutha, and for parallel narrative and political reasons, is tragedy, yes, but it is also martyrdom. Ammu is a martyr in several senses: Bose suggests that she dies for her erotic faith; however, she is also a martyr in the senses of memory and witnessing that are inherent in the etymology of "martyr" (558). Kristeva further grounds "martyr" in the Christian confession: "*Omologeo* and *martireo*, *I acknowledge* and *I bear witness* (129). Like Michel Foucault (67ff), though in a more direct manner, she associates confession with power beginning to inhere, not with a "judge-God," but in discourse, "or rather to the act of judgement expressed in speech and [...] in all the signs (poetry, painting, music, sculpture) that are contingent upon it (132).[11] This strengthens the connection of literature with the sacred, a connection in which literature becomes a kind of metadiscourse that subsumes confession and testimony, acts which, in the presence of an audience, are productive of power. The narrative style of *The God of*

Small Things is that of a traumatic memory and Ammu's death, as much as Velutha's, is authorial testimony as to the effects of caste, sexuality, and gender on the human and social body.

Rahel and Estha are the novel's traumatized witnesses and the description of the effect that the Terror has on each personality is indicative of the level of trauma induced by their exposure to the abject: "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits [...] appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons" (5). Most criticism focusses on the effects of trauma that Estha displays because his complete silence is the more dramatic deviation from societal norms of "healthy" behaviour. His more extreme response is appropriate to his greater exposure to the abject, both through his initial experience with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man and through his second exposure to the dying Velutha. This is an increase in quantity; however, his experiences are also qualitatively more deeply abject because each experience envelops Estha in "the shame of compromise" that attends each event (Kristeva 2).

Roy's description of the children's response to Chacko's battering down of their mother's bedroom door and his subsequent demand that she "Pack [her] things and go," exemplifies the novel's textbook portrayal of symptoms of trauma: "at the time, there would only be incoherence. As though meaning had slunk out of things and left them fragmented. Disconnected. The glint of Ammu's needle [...] a door slowly breaking. Isolated things that didn't *mean* anything" (215). Caruth (and Felman and Laub) discuss the prevalence of numbness, and the delayed and fragmentary knowledge that characterize the unusual cognitive state that signifies the traumatic experience (Caruth 4-7). For Estha, who clearly cannot articulate, and thereby testify to, the "terrible pictures in his head" (32), his silence and his traumatic experiences are "the abject from which he does not cease separating [...] a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered" (Kristeva 8).

Rahel, on the other hand, like her mother, seems more resilient and more rebellious. She has a discipline problem at her boarding schools and separates herself from Ayemenem as soon as possible. From the

point of view of her early, unresolved exposure to the abject, it is interesting that one of her school transgressions is to "decorat[e] a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers," which demonstrates her interest in, and ability to find beauty, in the abject (17). The authorities respond predictably: she is accused of "*depravity*" and made to read its definition from the "Oxford Dictionary" to group approbation. Without stretching the imagination, this incident may be read as a less intense repetition of her mother's more traumatic experiences. Rahel is an "acting out" sort of traumatized person; however, Roy's description of the flat affect, which the text describes as "emptiness," that impoverishes her intimate relationship with her husband, Larry, is also typical of trauma (21-2). Narrative description of this state foreshadows the future sexualization of the twins' relationship: "the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. [...] the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers' bodies" (21).

Although Chanda may be overstating the case in arguing that *The God of Small Things* is "about hope, empowerment and rebirth" (43), the (re)union of Estha and Rahel on the sexual plane contains, at least, a starting point for communication and healing. The night that "Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons" is marked by tears and a sharing of "not happiness, but hideous grief" (311). Although, once again, the Love Laws are broken, this time there is a sense of healing that stems in part from the images, noted by Chanda (43), of growth in the natural world that abound in June but also, in part, from the healing, sharing, and expressing of grief, which, previously, had been prevented by Estha's being "Returned" so quickly after the Terror. The twins follow their mother's example in their ability to act transgressively and also follow her injunction to "always love each other" (214).

There is also narrative indication of the healing effect of their (re)union. After the twins connect sexually, the narrative begins to run in a less traumatic fashion and, in the next (and final) chapter, the "conventional" portrayal of the sexual union of Ammu and Velutha takes place. The final chapter describes not only an event in the past but, ar-

guably, the ideal relationship that Ammu and Velutha might have enjoyed if the social abject and its resultant trauma did not exist. It is that ideal that ends the narrative and which, I would suggest, is "its testimonial resolution" (Felman xvii).

The irony involved in Ammu's other injunction to the twins is plain, and painfully signals that caste, in terms of purity and pollution, is the primary focus of the novel: "I think it's high time that you learned the difference between CLEAN and DIRTY. Especially in this country" (142). Through the abject, and the traumatic results that ensue when unauthorized mixing occurs, the caste system is read as a purity/pollution binary that does not protect but, instead, damages society. Roy risks the ire of nationalists by criticizing some traditional aspects of Indian society directly, although *The God of Small Things* also gestures to the plethora of complicated and traumatic historical strands that entwine to produce the contemporary situation. Of these, one of the most notable in the narrative is the continuing pernicious effects of British Imperialism on formerly colonized peoples. Diametrically opposed effects of colonialism are seen in their divisive effects within the family when Chacko, who has married the (symbolic) colonizer (who, significantly, has divorced him), reinvests in the colonial experience by inviting Margaret and their daughter for a visit. Ammu, who is capable of criticizing her own society, particularly its continuing subaltern attitudes, resents the colonizing situation that ensues and demands of Chacko, "Must we behave like some damn godforsaken tribe that's just been discovered?" (171). She also directly confronts the Englishwoman's colonizing condescension. This exchange demonstrates that Roy's criticism of the abjection of women and Untouchables, as she fictionalizes it in Ayemenem, is not based in naïve Anglophilia.

The God of Small Things may be read as a novel of its time in the sense that Felman claims that we are now in "the age of testimony" (5). As sacred literature, fictional testimony, the novel draws on the power of the abject to witness the traumas of contemporary history as Roy interprets them. Traumatic memory patterns inspire not only the content but also the narrative structure. Since *The God of Small Things* thereby

doubles descriptions of the abject and traumatic responses to it, it concentrates its literary power, which accounts for its dramatic effect on individual readers and its widespread success. Albeit in another context, Felman questions whether testimony is "a simple medium of historical transmission, or [...] in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing" (9). *The God of Small Things* seems to share the "urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival" with testimonial writing (Beverley 26),[12] which implies a desire for social healing, figured perhaps in the (re)union of Estha and Rahel. It remains to be seen whether its power will remain beyond our era of testimony or whether its testimony will further the healing of the body politic that it addresses. Its reception by, and interaction with, the histories of countries and millions of individual readers will determine its effect in that regard.

Notes

1 I do not mean to imply that the reading necessarily traumatizes readers; rather, it allows us to witness trauma's effects through our experience of the narrative structure. This may give readers some access (how much is subject to debate) to the trauma's effect as well since, as Caruth insists, "the pathology consists [...] solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception" (4). Felman discusses a "relation between trauma and pedagogy" (1), which permits testimonial literature to create educational opportunities by inducing "crises" in readers (53). This may, partially, account for the feeling that reading such literature can "change our lives."

2 Similarly, Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, whose insights underlie most of my own arguments, is a brilliant meditation on abjection, psychoanalysis, and literature; however, she doesn't relate these to trauma studies.

3 Although Douglas argues against psychological interpretations of the cultural phenomena that she studies, her entirely justified objections have to do with psychoanalysis being used both to personalize cultural behaviours that she feels are more socially based and to allow the inappropriate attribution of personal development and pathology to cultures (115-18 and *passim*); neither Kristeva nor McClintock use psychoanalytic theory in these ways.

4 Roy's ear seems attuned to even the most minor evocations of the abject: "icky" is a frequent, if informal, English language response to minor forms of the abject and being (s)"ick" is Estha's typical response.

5 India is by no means unique in this. In Canada, where I live, it is common knowledge that Native peoples are far more likely to be arrested and physically abused by police, generally, and, in cases of suspected pedophilia, gay men and men with mental illnesses are significantly more likely targets for police action. All three groups face various degrees of abjection from Canadian society.

6 Unfortunately, Roy seems to connect the evil that these men represent with homosexuality. They are called "hairy fairies with lethal wands" (290), an image so startling in its overt homophobia that one wonders if its use is naïve. Subsequently, the narrator informs readers, however, that the "policemen minced past [an old Englishman ghost]," and the derogatory verb, "mince," which is often linked to gay men, confirms the connection of the earlier slang, "fairies," and its synonym "homosexuals." Since there is nothing in the text to suggest that the policemen are gay, the connection seems gratuitous and offensive.

7 There is, however, a gesture towards resolution in that, by choosing to do as they please with their bodies, Ammu and Velutha each, like the Sahajiy cult that Chatterjee looks to for an Indian-based critique of caste, "define a claim of proprietorship over one's own body, to negate the daily submission of one's body and its labor to the demands made by the dominant dharma and to assert a domain of bodily activity where it can, with the full force of ethical conviction, disregard those demands" (195). Bose validates the importance of the deliberateness of their choice in arguing for the political nature of the erotics in *The God of Small Things* (70).

8 McClintock discusses "the paradox of abjection as a formative aspect of modern industrial imperialism [wherein] certain groups are expelled and obliged to inhabit the impossible edges of modernity: the slum, the ghetto, the garret, the brothel, the convent, the colonial bantustan and so on" (72). In this context, as Oumhani notes (89), the novel implicitly compares the situation of the subaltern in the colonies to the Untouchable in the caste system when Chacko claims that Indians are "unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" as, previously, Paravans were forced to erase their own footprints while crawling backwards (51).

9 Tirhankar Chanda argues that "the most significant intertext [of *The God of Small Things*] is that of the archetypal return of the exiled subject to his native land" (43). Certainly Chacko, Ammu, Velutha, Estha, and Rahel all bear the marks of their absences. Even Pappachi came to Ayemenem late in life after trips abroad and a working life spent in Delhi.

10 It must be noted, however, that her emphasis on sex that is female-initiated and that also emphasizes (believable) female sexual satisfaction makes it conventional within a more limited set of texts than Ahmad recognizes.

11 These analyses rely heavily on Christian theology, which seems appropriate for application to Roy's text, which describes a Syrian Christian family from what appears to be a Christian point of view.

12 John Beverley specifically distinguishes the novel form from *testimonio* (26); however, I find the similarity of aims, as he states them, to be quite striking as regards *The God of Small Things.*

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