

The Minor-narrative of Transgression in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The debut novel of the Indian architect Arundhati Roy (1997) successfully won the Booker Prize (1997), offering bountiful insight into the real India through connecting dots of memory. Opposed to the master-narrative in the British canonical literary works, a minor-narrative is adopted in this novel, casting realistic light on the postcolonial India. This paper probes into the minor narrative of transgressions in various aspects: language, philosophy and ethnicity. The penetrating use of indigenous language such as Malayalam, the striking contrast between Christian God and “the God of small things”, and the love affair between different castes transgress and defy the social norms, reflecting Arundhati Roy’s wish for a just society in India.

Key words:

The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy, postcolonial, minor-narrative, transgression

Introduction

Colonization in previous centuries brought enormous wealth to colonizers and massive poverty to colonies. With the marching of time, many former colonies have now gained independence. However, problems such as injustice and poverty did not ebb away with independence. The withdrawal of political occupation was followed by the economic and cultural dominance in an invisible but powerful way. Such crises pose great trouble to activists and critics, thus inspiring a large number of literary works which probe into the causes and solutions. Among the postcolonial narrative genres, trauma fiction, sorry novel and magical realism have been recognized by the academia (Hawley 75).

The early efforts of some postcolonial writers were torn between the subconscious emulation of canonical English works and conscious awareness of nationalism. The necessity to use English and the unconscious influence of English literary styles seem to impede the complete independence of former colonies. According to Westall (20), "postcolonial theory and literary studies evolve partly out of the commonwealth grounding (English as a language) is indicative of the ways in which English

literature maintains British interests, refusing to give way to alternative models of literary study". During the process of colonization, "modes of knowledge and meaning" are "repressed by the colonizers' patterns of expression and beliefs" (Dominguez, Saussy and Villanueva 43). In other word, postcolonial literary works and research are intertwined with cultural and political issues. The interpretation of a postcolonial work is necessarily dependent on political exegesis besides literary analysis, just as Edward Said says that postcolonial research is a "discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw" (41).

In the world-renowned novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy relates the reunion of twins Estha and Rahel, interpolated with past memories about their cousin's (Sophie Mol's) death, their mother's (Ammu's) death and their mother's lover's (Velutha's) death. Under the title "The God of Small Things", nothing is complete and everything is small. Readers have to finish the whole book so as to piece together the whole story. The desires and pursuits of each character are unfulfilled, submerging into the daily trifles. This kind of narrative is contrary to the traditional master narrative and is justifiable to the name of "minor-narrative". Master narrative is the "pre-existent socio-cultural forms of interpretation" (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 287). In synch with this narrative transgression, there are three types of transgression noticed by the author of this paper, namely in language,

philosophy, and ethnicity. An elaborated analysis of the narrative style and the three transgressions will be provided in this paper, casting light on the novel and innovative postcolonial narrative at the same time.

Minor-narrative

Minor-narrative means the opposite narrative to master narrative that focuses on the heroic deeds of important protagonists and are "socio-culturally dominant" (qtd. in Herman, Jahn and Ryan: 288). I intentionally propose this term to describe such narrative trial. It is meaningful for postcolonial studies in that it manifests attempts of former colonies to enter the long-established field of European modernism — "attempts at new narrative perspectives ... and focus on the everyday life of ordinary figures" (qtd. in Hawley: 77). The narrative is minor in three aspects: collage of plot, incomplete characters and "the God of small things" symbolized by Velutha.

The temporal development of this novel is circular and interpolated with flashbacks. The main plot is the reunion of Estha and Rahel in their old house which is now inhabited by their great aunt Baby Kochamma. The curtain hung over the whole picture is gradually pulled with the narration of past memories. Events that have profoundly influenced their life include the death of their cousin Sophie Mol, the death of their mom Ammu, and the death of their beloved "untouchable" Velutha. The reading experience is like collecting pieces of information, but

each piece of memory matters a lot for the development of the whole story.

In narratology, the desires of characters drive the development of plot (Fludernik 46). Each character in this novel aches for equality but fails to fulfil their desire. Chacko, the uncle of Estha and Rahel, strives for social equality especially in the English society. He has been to England for study, but he faces problems in finding a decent job there. Unwillingly, he comes back to India and fritters around. His incompleteness is also transformed into the admiration for his apotheosized daughter who is given birth by an English wife. Baby Kochamma, the great aunt of Estha and Rahel, pursues all her life for the illusory romance with an Ireland priest. She even converts to Christianity; under whose guise she courts to her Mr. White. However, she ends up in writing "I love you" line after line in her diary. Love is minimized into lines. The most apparent evidence of characters' incompleteness is found in the cross-caste love between Velutha and Ammu. They resort to small things like plants and little gadgets in order to avoid the helpless fear for punishment. Every character is minor compared with heroes in canonical epics, which are prominent in master narratives. And their incompleteness drives the diegesis forward.

Such narrative style is harmoniously merged with transgression to foreground the futile national independence and detrimental caste system. The

cooperative effect of the God of small things (Velutha) with transgression will be elaborated in the following part.

Existing manacles

Over the three hundred years of colonization in India, people have suffered from exploitation, discrimination and depression. The underprivileged lower-caste groups were minimized to unimportant dirt regardless of their human noumenon. However, the condition remained much the same even after the hard-won national independence. The history of India was uprooted by the colonizers and its house of history has remained vacant ever since. Similar to many post-independence nations such as Africa and Brazil, India has “almost inevitably taken over the role of colonial state and maintained its administrative and class structure” (Ashcroft 31). By reluctantly taking up the role of former colonizers in maintaining the social and class order, India seems to have resolved the problem of dangling history. Meanwhile, with the thriving of nationalism and national literature, many novels with Indian characteristics spring up. This explains the phenomenon of bursting “domestic novel” in replace of the love-and-marriage novel in India (Trivedi 19).

The present problems in India extend beyond the external manacle imposed by its former colonizers. They reach down into the internal complex caste system, the blind and vain belief in Marxism and the drifting national

history. In order to expose the underlying problem, Arundhati Roy, a political activist, probes into the minute anecdotes of a large family (that of Estha and Rahel) and appeals for awareness of such self-manacle even after national independence. Self-manacle indicates that India adheres to rigid class division and ethnic distinction. It is the root of many problems emerging in the post-independence India. Therefore, transgression is foregrounded as a way out of the suffocating problems existing in India.

Transgression in language

Colonization denotes economic, political and cultural exploitation exerted on the colonized people. Those who suffer from such unjust treatments are subaltern. Subalternity is "a position without identity", and it is "not a cultural origin, it is a sense of economic collectivity, of social relations of formations as the basis of action" (Spivak 61). Colonized people are deprived of ethnicity, nationality or even humanity, which is especially true for those low-caste people. The imposed foreign rationality, belief and religion deceive them into believing democracy and freedom. However, the illusory paradise often turns out to be an abyss. For example, those "untouchable" Indians often dive hastily into Marxism and Christianity in the hope of emancipation, ending up struggling between the impenetrable frustration and desperation.

The post-independence India enjoys not much freedom. The remnant influence of Britain hides in various aspects of the society. Different from violent invasion and colonization before the national independence, such colonization was achieved through non-violent yet three effective stages:

“First the repression which results in the impossibility for the colonized to produce culture; second, colonizers impose a mystified image of their patterns of knowledge and meaning, which are set apart from the colonized. And third, these patterns are latter taught, in a partial and selective way, to some colonized in order to co-opt them onto some of the colonizers’ power institutions” (Dominguez 43).

Such soft colonization is in accordance with the development of English as one of India’s official languages.

A large number of languages coexist in the land of India. English is regarded as an official language in order to facilitate communication and simplify business transactions in this vast territory. Different ethnic groups are connected through English, slightly relieving the tight tension among them. Many literary works are written in English, which serve to distinguish the literate and the illiterate. This language, as a tool left by the former colonizer, still exerts control over the land. “Englishness”, embodied by English the language, has taken the place of Britishness

as the dominant power in enforcing limitations and restrictions.

The shrouding influence of English is manifested in literature, culture and history as well. Indians grope for its wandering history. The history house was once occupied by the colonizers. Under the threat of guns and powders, they had to live in humiliation and endure the hardship. With time going by, they finally fought with great courage and won the house back again. However, to their dismay, they found that the house was no longer what it was before. The future generations can only know about the present decoration of this history house.

The metaphor explains why Indian writers seek to record and preserve their oral history. Traditional history books are written in English, expounding manipulated and biased "reality" of historical events. On the contrary, oral history is natural and special with local flavor. History can be recorded through some obscure sounds, which can only be understood within a certain group. This exclusive area opens a treasure house for the Indian academia and encourages many writers to involve orature into literature.

The features of orature include the use of many indigenous Indian languages, such as Malayalam (an Indian language in the state of Kerala). The effort to establish India-characterized element into the literary niche is reflected in *The God of Small Things* as well. According to Stockdale, "Arundhati Roy wrote *The God of*

Small Things predominately in English; however, she does include a number of words in Malayalam, thus making the reader work for some of the most pertinent information in the novel" (3).

Bountiful evidences of characteristic and indigenous diction can be found in the novel. Words and sentences of special implication is italic, no matter they are English or Malayalam. What's more, correspondent translations of English words are usually voiced by Estha and Rahel. For example, in chapter 2 "Pappachi's Moth", the song of Elvis "But moonin' an' a groonin' gonna satisfy mah soul, less have a pardy" (Roy 32) is ironically and humorously changed in the mouth of Estha. The combination of Malayalam and English in oral form also represents a transgression in language. A little child as Estha is, he wants to be as charming as an English super star. However, the unobtainable accurateness of Englishness is exposed to criticize the effortless pursuit of Indians for an equal position with English people.

Such sarcastic transgression of language is not only manifested in the insurmountable language barrier, but also the deep-rooted linguistic habits. In chapter 5 "God's Own Country", the Marxist comrade Pillai tries to speak standard English but fails by bursting out Malayalam time after time. Whenever he speaks Malayalam, he adds the English counterparts. For example, "'Aiyyo paavam' Comrade Pillai whispered, and his nipples dropped in mock dismay. 'Poor fellow'" (Roy 94). As a low-caste but

touchable Indian, Pillai endeavors for all his life to win respect and power. However, he is psychologically repressed even though he turns to Marxism for help. He cannot get rid of his habits, which signifies his cultural root.

Linguistic transgression comprises the opposition between English and indigenous language, the insurmountable linguistic barrier and the effortless pursuit for linguistic equality. In this novel, Roy scathingly reveals the situation and advocates ripping off the camouflage of social status through language.

Transgression in philosophy

Philosophy here indicates only belief in Marxism and Christianity. The "God of small things" is embodied in Velutha, the untouchable in Indian caste system. He is a carpenter in the big house of Ayemenem. Between him and Ammu, a secret and doomed love affair is germinated. The similarity he shares with the western God is that he is in control of everything about wood. The little gadget is waiting to be born through his hands in the raw wood. However, beyond the world of wood, he is deprived of power at all. He is "the God of small things". He is never "the God of big things".

The application of religious prototype in this novel reveals the transgression in canonical image. God is no longer omnipotent. "The God of small things" is helpless with his

love, life and equal right beyond wood. Furthermore, he is betrayed by his beloved Estha. He is crucified without resurrection. The Christian God becomes an impotent God in the land of India. Such opposing effect transgresses the normal concept and reveals the cataclysmic caste system in India.

Ironically, Velutha's belief in Marxism does not help pull him out of the abyss. He is the only authorized comrade of Communist Party in the pickle factory. Still, no one recognizes his identity, manifesting prejudice and contempt against such a menial being. This is a historical dilemma for the low-caste people. The country rebels against British domination and seeks proletarian freedom. The prospect seems promising for every alive people on this land. However, the obstinate caste system is still deeply rooted in the heart of everyone, destroying the possibility of relieving pain and suffering from the fore-independence India. It is not necessarily that Marxism contributes nothing to India, but that Marxism is not totally accepted by people. Even though Velutha transgresses into the realm of Marxism and searches for fraternity, he is destined to be tricked by others' hypocritical conversion to Marxism.

Velutha represents a "conquered hero" of minor-narrative, which deviates from the world-savior in master narrative. His opposition to the image of Christian God and transgression of belief are aimed to expose the hypocrisy of India's Marxism and the reluctant process of

liberation. That caste system is an impediment to the comprehensive emancipation of India is in line of what Roy wants to appeal for in her political career.

Transgression in ethnicity

The vast and populous territory of India engender frequent and severe conflicts among different ethnic groups. Political interests and power competition aggravate the riot. The ethnic groups in India is rigidly classified into different castes. The higher caste gains control over the lower caste, and the lowest caste is deemed untouchable or even toxic. This inhuman division still exists in India nowadays, thus the effort to dismantle such unreasonable system is urgent. It is out of such political mission that Roy endeavors to challenge the system in this novel by depicting a cross-caste love affair.

The transgression of ethnicity in this novel is revealed as the love between Velutha the untouchable and Ammu the touchable. Even though the caste system and Love Law prescribe whom should people love and how much, the two characters cherish tender admiration for each other. If Velutha does not belong to the untouchable, the condition for them will be rather satisfying. With adept skills, a decent job and a kind heart, Velutha will prove himself an excellent husband for Ammu. Just because he is the untouchable, he is not granted the right to love the higher caste. Anger towards such inhuman system pushes him to turn to Marxism for help. To his disappointment,

the so-called liberating belief does not help pull him out of the abyss. Such transgression of ethnicity is doomed.

Interestingly, not only do the higher caste oppress the lower caste, those who belong to the same caste repress anyone from destroying such a system. The rainstorm that devours the life of Velutha is deluged by his father, an honest servant of the Ayemenem family. The fear towards such unimaginable vice overshadows the possibility of losing his own son. In this way, Roy may want to point out that self-manacle is even worse than restrictions from outside.

The story is a tragedy, since the protagonist Velutha fails to fulfil his desire. What inhibits him include the hypocritical Indian Marxism, caste system and self-manacle within his caste. The hero in such minor-narrative is a "conquered hero" opposed to that of a master narration.

Conclusion

In the realm of postcolonial studies, new narrative forms emerge in order to represent national literature and counter the canonical literary form. New motifs are explored at the same time. But no matter how creative the form or content are, the literary works are concerned about revealing the existing problems. What is unique to postcolonial study is that it is often connected with political issues. This paper analyzes the creative narrative

form—minor-narrative (contrary to master narrative), and employs it to reveal the focus of this novel—transgression. Transgression of language (the use of local language and characteristic language contrasting with English), transgression of philosophy (vain belief in Marxism and ironic comparison with Christian God), and transgression of ethnicity (cross-caste romance) all reflect Roy's concern about the existing manacles in India, either they are imposed by the former colonizers or itself.

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