



TEMPORAL HYBRIDITY AND UNRELIABLE TRAUMATIC MEMORY: A CRITICAL READING OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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Abstract: This research paper critically examines Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, focusing on the theme of temporal hybridity and its connection to unreliable traumatic memory. The narrative intricately weaves past, present, and future experiences, a characteristic often attributed to magical realism, Post Colonialism and Post Modernism. While existing scholarship has linked this temporal blending to stylistic and political elements, the paper contends that an essential aspect—trauma—plays a pivotal role in shaping the temporal mix experienced by the protagonists.

Index Terms – Trauma, Temporal Hybridity, Unreliable Memory,

Introduction

The God of Small Things, by Arundhati Roy, is a bewildering mix of past, present, and future experiences. Images, memories, and sensations from the past merge with present moments and even future events. This temporal merging has been highlighted by critics, who have attributed it to the novel's magical realism, postcolonialism, or postmodernism, all of which are connected with various forms of time play. Time is always a combination, as writers from Joyce to Woolf to Rushdie tell us, because the present must be understood as a complex amalgamation and negotiation of past moments. However, another crucial feature of blended time that has been overlooked by stylistic and political readings of Roy's novel is the important function of trauma in establishing the temporal mix experienced by the protagonists. One of the most well-known aftereffects of traumatic experience is a disorganization of time, in which past experiences threaten to take over the present, reappearing in the form of flashbacks, hallucinations, or dreams to haunt the present moment. Trauma reorganizes time, so the temporal combination in Roy's novel must be understood not only as a component of a postmodern or postcolonial narrative, but also as a symptom of traumatic experience. Roy illustrates what we can refer to as "temporal hybridity" in both her characters' lives and her narrative structure, creating a vivid map of trauma's long-term effects. However, Roy also suggests that there may be another temporal zone separate from her characters', one accessible exclusively to the reader, and one in which time's hybridity—through this very access—may indicate not disruption but the promise of profound political and social change.

Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridization demands that we see cultural encounters as more than simple binary oppositions, but as encounters in which ambivalence and plurality rule, and where the apparent sides may in reality be hybridizations themselves. Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and others have gone further in their exploration of how time itself must be understood as multiple, with Bhabha proposing "a dialectic of various temporalities" as a way to unsettle the repressive illusion of "fixed and stable forms of a hegemonic nationalist narrative" ("DissemiNation" 303), and Chakrabarty exploring the idea of "time knots" of multiple

moments that may disrupt the narrative. *The God of Small Things* can be read through the lens of postcolonial theories of hybridity, as well as parallel critical work on time, to propose a temporal hybridity, one that, while in Roy's novel, may have the liberating power to disrupt existing narratives, more often reflects the brutal after-effects of traumatic events. Time is not a binary meeting for Roy's characters, but a hybrid where distinct moments become simultaneous, many, and ambiguous. The current moment is both a perilous merging of many times and, conversely, a rejection of those moments to blend, indicating the past traumatic event's resistance to be incorporated into an evolving story.

Roy's depiction of individual and collective trauma through temporal hybridity

Analysing Roy's description of temporal hybridity also allows for a deeper dive into some of the most thorny aspects of trauma theory, one that illuminates questions of representation and recovery within theoretical frameworks while also presenting a critical role for the reader. Many theorists argue that Is there a risk that the writer would traumatise the reader by depicting the aftereffects of trauma? And how may both author and reader avoid the aestheticization of traumatic experience, which could potentially re-victimize a victim, within this fight of representation? Roy addresses these issues both through her individual characters and through her depiction of collective forms of community trauma, and she proposes a specific location for the reader in each of these regions.

The God of Small Things has two main story lines that are intertwined. The first thread chronicles the tragic events that occurred in Ayemenem during a two-week period in 1969 for an Indian family. Mammachi is joined in the family by her two grown children, Ammu and Chacko, who are both divorced and have returned home, as well as Ammu's seven-year-old twins, Rahel and Estha. During these two weeks, Estha is molested by a stranger; Chacko's half-English daughter Sophie arrives from America only to drown by accident; and Ammu's love affair with an untouchable worker named Velutha leads to Velutha's brutal beating by a group of policemen, which occurs in front of the twins and results in his death. The second narrative takes place on a day in 1993, when Estha and Rahel meet for the first time in twenty-three years, a meeting that culminates in an incestuous sexual encounter. Other stories regarding each of the characters, both before and after 1969, are told in addition to these two primary themes. Roy alternates chapters between the two core themes, but each chapter meanders back and forth between different time periods, creating a complicated web of parallels and allusions. The stories are peppered with flashbacks and imagery as previous events resurface in the present, and future events, for some reason, appear to disrupt the past. Roy's writing mimics the way her characters see the current moment, which is constantly already plagued by past and future occurrences, by portraying the novel's chronological framework as a disorderly mix of many times that can only be put together by the reader.

The novel's temporal mix remaps one of the most commonly noticed aspects of individual cases of post-traumatic stress: the feeling of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Two major inconsistencies are identified by trauma theorists. To begin with, traumatic events can be both purged from memory and resurface as flashbacks. For example, post-traumatic stress amnesia can "paradoxically coexist with the opposite: intrusive recollections and unbidden recurrent visions of traumatic occurrences," according to Mark Greenberg and Bessel van der Kolk. A second paradox involves the freezing of time at a single point, trapping the subject in a past moment of trauma—yet there is a false sense of movement or unfreezing, as the memory returns to haunt the present again and again.

The twins and their mother Ammu, the novel's most traumatised characters, display Roy's painstaking portrayal of temporal hybridity, with its mixture of forgetfulness and flashback, frozen time and inexorable return. Rahel, for example, is troubled by recurring memories despite remaining the most functional of the trio and appearing to remember the most about her experience. Her cousin Sophie Mol's drowning death is still fresh in her mind; the death "was always there... It ushered Rahel through childhood (from school to school to school) into womanhood" (17). The repeating symbol of Rahel's toy watch, which constantly shows the same time, ten to two, exemplifies this static omnipresence in a simpler but starker form. The watch is buried near the scene of Velutha's beating and Sophie Mol's death, as if permanently recording the moment and place when time stopped—while also implying that the moment will always be present. Roy adds to Rahel's temporal difficulty by remembering incidents she did not witness; for example, because she is telepathically linked to her twin Estha, she is aware of his molestation by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man, though he never tells her directly. The combination of amnesia and flashback occurs in two people here, with Estha forgetting and Rahel having the flashback. For Rahel, it's not just that she has to live with these half-forgotten horrors in the present. Each moment becomes entangled with the others, crowding them out and refusing to be merged. Time is both problematically hybrid and problematically separate, as bits of the past

are perceived separately but together, refusing to be organised sequentially and therefore failing to transfer into the past.

Ammu goes through a mirror image of such temporal hybridity; frozen time becomes a symptom of trauma as well as a possible protection, as Ammu seeks to stop time to protect herself from the past. Ammu's attempts to freeze time collide with the evidence of thaw, as she tries to ignore time's passage while also grappling with her incapacity to make time "stand still"—an effort that, unfortunately, paralyses her even more. Time cannot be arranged in a linear fashion; rather, it is experienced all at once, with the various moments feeding off of one another in a temporal feedback loop. Ammu is ultimately overcome by this massive attempt to keep time frozen, according to Roy, as she stops time in the only way left—by dying.

Estha enters a silent universe in which time does not completely stop at one point; it just stops to exist. What is "unspeakable" remains unspoken, yet the unspeakable persists, engaging in aggressive and even desperate attempts to numb, entomb, or tranquilise the persistent memory. The sheer variety of ways in which the silence works to mute the past suggests that the past comes back to Estha at any point, and the only way to get out of this hybrid time is to shut off the present as well.

For the majority of the novel, temporal hybridity serves as both a sign and a symptom of trauma, revealing that remembering and forgetting are both dangerous, with no relief. All of these characters are on a quest to reclaim the present, to make something happen, not just happen, but the past continues to invade. The trio is both individually and collectively haunted by the hybridity of time. They carry a more comprehensive story of what happened when read together, but only the reader has access to it, not the characters. Despite the overpowering sensation of numerous times, individual recollections have gaps and erasures that can only be filled, if at all, by another's memory. These many forms of temporal hybridity are depicted not just in Roy's characters, but also in the novel's structure. Here, form follows content; Roy recounts the symptoms of trauma while also demonstrating them in the narrative, constructing her story as though the readers are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder themselves. The story returns to images, words, and sensory experiences—the sickening sweet scent of blood, the watch, a repeating image of a rose—giving the reader both textual evidence of the protagonists' immobility and a flashback experience. Readers can also follow the layers of narrative voices in Roy's novel—the voices that record and recount the stories—from a perspective that no character can. Roy uses a third-person omniscient voice that appears to have access to multiple characters at times and at other times, the voice slips into free indirect discourse, speaking in the style and observations of, say, the young Rahel or the child version of Estha, inviting the reader to see and experience from a specific point of view. Readers gain access to more of the story than any single participant due to the diversity of voices and narrative tones and views. Certainly, the reader's information is inadequate, but traumatic experiences are often distinguished by a lack of outside context, a lack of ability to conceive a witness witnessing and recording the event.

Roy's characters, as we've seen, suffer from a traumatic temporal hybridity brought on by unique, overpowering experiences. However, Roy also addresses broader community experiences of hybridity in her work, which are fueled in part by the lingering consequences of colonial power and in part by entrenched patterns of caste and gender discrimination. The experience of collective trauma has been described by sociologist Kai Erikson as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (187). The community traumas in Roy's work, in turn, engender communal experiences of temporal hybridity, which speak to the long-term impacts of oppression in significant ways. When critic Greg Forster distinguishes between "punctual" trauma, which results from a single overwhelming event, and "those forms of trauma that are... more mundanely catastrophic... the trauma induced by patriarchal identity formation rather than the trauma of rape, the violence not of lynching but of everyday racism," he notices such patterns (260). Communal traumas have disturbed time in Roy's novel even before individual traumas cause their own disruptions. For example, colonialism's severe damage to communal relations—in addition to the development of various individual traumas—creates a sense of temporal disorder in the community on several levels, echoing Roy's characters' traumatic temporal hybridity. For numerous of Roy's characters, British and American culture, for example, signifies the current moment, the present time, to be favoured over—but also to be opposed by—older India's or previous civilizations. A temporal hybridity could emerge from a cultural hybridity.

Roy goes on to explain how the community's entrenched caste system creates its own temporal mix; rather than a multitude of moments, the caste system appears to both freeze and erase time, decreeing that social position must remain constant throughout history. Untouchables like Velutha should leave no physical or figurative traces in time, trapped in one role for all time and leaving no trace. The many reactions to India's caste system create a "time warp" in the country, forcing India to "live in numerous centuries simultaneously," as Roy noted in an interview. With all of these kinds of communal trauma, Roy looks at how members of a

group could have a different sense of time than the rest of the community, and how the community as a whole might struggle with competing aspects of the past in the present.

Roy describes this sense of communal temporal hybridity in Chacko's image of the History House, which on first reading seems to speak only to the after-effects of colonial rule. In a post-colonial present, Chacko offers voice to a shared temporal hybridity. Chacko declares that they are cut off from history, a history that may be illusive in any case, comprised of shadows and unheard whispering, as his terminology suggests. Chacko suggests that India remains trapped in the conquerors' narrative even after independence, forced to dream foreign aspirations and play unchosen roles.

The reference to Conrad in the History House is part of a larger set of references to British and American authors and films, all of which serve to highlight Roy's own articulation of the Indian voices left out of these cultural texts while also emphasising how damaging this exclusion is, particularly for the twins. Chacko, Rahel, and Estha frequently use British and American classics to narrate or shape their lives; Chacko quotes Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Estha cites *A Tale of Two Cities*, the twins memorise *The Jungle Book* and parts of *The Tempest*, and the entire family is enthralled by *The Sound of Music*. Estha is disturbed by *The Sound of Music*, particularly when he is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man during the film; his feelings of shame from the sexual trauma blend with his larger sense that, as an Indian child, he is outside of what he perceives to be the "clean white children" of the film. Thus, Roy's novel's intertextuality denotes a temporal hybridity that is both a symptom of trauma and a potential stimulator of more disruption, as well as a manner of highlighting the potentially harmful blends that such intertextuality might engender.

Representation of traumatic memory through Roy's depiction of temporal hybridity

Many theorists, including Cathy Caruth, have argued that a traumatic event is incompletely recorded at the time of occurrence; part of the trauma experience is this blankness, as well as the paradox of the memory's precise, repeated return at the same time that the memory is strangely inaccessible to conscious recall. Writers can only portray the effects of trauma in their writing if they want to stay authentic to the terrible experience. Caruth and others have been chastised for this position by Ruth Leys, who claims that the idea is fundamentally inconsistent. Caruth and van der Kolk say that "traumatic memory entails a literal imprint of an external trauma that [is] lodged in the brain in a specific traumatic memory system," which "defies every possibility of representation," while Leys disputes this assertion. The characters' past traumas are written on them, but Roy depicts the inscription's fractured and incomplete quality, as if the traumas themselves are partly unrepresentable to the characters but still chasing them through memory pieces. Most of the important traumas of the novel have already occurred at the start of the novel, but the reader's recollection of these events is lost, and the characters' memories are represented by gaps and startling fragmentary flashbacks. The violent past events bleed through to the present, sometimes as bits of sense impressions, sometimes as more definite memories, despite the fact that they appear to have vanished from the major narrative until the end of the novel. Once the narrative arc reaches these events, they are recounted chronologically, either from the perspective of the key characters or from the victims' or perpetrators' perspectives. In other words, Roy depicts both the actual traumas and their fragmented and disassociated aftermath, a representation that acknowledges both the possibility of representation at the novel level and the way such representations are frequently shattered or forgotten at the character level.

Roy's deft transformation of a traumatic version of temporal hybridity into a potentially liberating one ultimately offers a possible response to trauma that bears witness to trauma's inexorable capacity for continued damage while simultaneously imagining a new sort of temporal recovery through narrative. Readers can conceive political transformation through temporal hybridity, which is both a symptom of problematic and traumatic blending and a tool to imagine political change.

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