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The River and the Dance: Arundhati Roy

I want to begin our discussion of specific examples of the cultures of postcolonial environments by looking at an Indian writer who by virtue of her highly visible political activism has become closely identified as one of the faces of what Guha and his colleagues have called the 'environmentalism of the poor'. I want to suggest, contrary to what a lot of literary critics have suggested, that it is a firmly held conviction of the inseparability of environment and history that supports Arundhati Roy's political and aesthetic work, and that we cannot understand these without engaging with that conviction. I want to show how Roy's novel, the only one she has published to date (there are strong rumours that she is completing her much-awaited second novel), reveals itself as a register of the environment of uneven historical development specific to postcolonial India. In order to engage fully with this text we will have to bring to it the environmental-historical aesthetic that we have been calling 'eco-materialism'.

With some notable exceptions that I will look at below, for most critics and commentators it is Roy's deft narrative style that explains the phenomenal global success of her 1997 Booker prize-winning debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. One consequence of this focus on literary style is that 'Roy the author' is frequently seen as a different creature to 'Roy the activist', who is perhaps best known for her flamboyant and committed opposition to the construction of the gigantic dam system on the river Narmada in the Indian states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.[1] Roy herself, however, in numerous interviews and essays, has expressed her irritation with this formula that neatly separates her literary labour from her political ones: 'I've been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True,

The God of Small Things is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays' (2002, p. 175).

Of course it would be wrong to say that the politics of Roy's novel have been entirely missed by her readers. The plot of the novel sees the twins Estha and Rahel reunited with each other after a long separation following a series of traumatic incidents that ended their childhood. These involved the accidental drowning of their English cousin, a random sexual attack on Estha and the discovery that their mother was involved with a man in an affair that crossed caste and class lines. Estha and Rahel's reunion, nearly three decades after these events, ends in them having an incestuous relationship. Evidently, Roy's evocation of sexual politics and the politics of sexuality in a small town in the southern Indian state of Kerala has provoked much heated debate and in some cases, vociferous protests (Ahmad 1997, pp. 103–11). There is much of value in these criticisms that do make an effort to read Roy politically, as someone like Aijaz Ahmad does. But we will see that a full engagement with the politics of Roy's novel needs to understand the symbiosis between environment, history and culture. Schematically speaking, we might lay out the argument thus: Arundhati Roy's literary style, form and subject (just like those present in the works of Amitav Ghosh and some of the other writers we will also look at) are deeply-considered artistic responses to the historically specific condition of uneven development in India, a condition that cannot be understood as long as we understand environment as a separate category to those of history and culture. So, Roy's novel, and the others that we will consider below, demands the application of an eco-materialist perspective which sees environment, history and culture in their real, mutually interpenetrated condition. Before we consider what such an integrated reading of Roy's novel might look like, let us pick out the major strands in the existing critical literature on it.

Uneven style

A dominant theme in the critical reception of Roy's novel has been an alleged stylistic unevenness, which has drawn both negative and positive comments. Thus, Prasad (2004, pp. 214–15) talks about Roy's omniscient third-person narrator who is:

> possessed of his/her own consciousness which gives shape to the linguistic expression and unconventional words and phrases, syntax and structure ... as a result we have broken sentences, illogical statements,

unrestricted sprinkling of italics, bizarre phrases, ungrammatical constructions, unconventional rhythm.

Similarly, M.P. Sinha has noted the juxtaposition of interior monologues with dramatic scenes and a narrator who is 'sometimes a young girl of seven or mostly, a young woman of thirty-one and occasionally a person who, knows everything but is Rahel neither at seven nor at thirty-one' (2001, p. 75). In making such critical assessments, what these writers have in mind are passages such as this:

> Now if you'll kindly hold this for me,' the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man said, handing Estha his penis through his soft white muslin dhoti, 'I'll get you your drink. Orange? Lemon?'
>
> Estha held it because he had to.
>
> 'Orange? Lemon?' the Man said. 'Lemonorange?'
>
> 'Lemon, please,' Estha said politely.
>
> He got a cold bottle and a straw. So he held a bottle in one hand and a penis in the other. Hard, hot, veiny. Not a moonbeam...
>
> 'Good,' the Orangedrink Lemondrink man said. 'Excellent'.
>
> His hand closed tighter over Estha's. Tight and sweaty. And faster still.
>
> *Fast faster fest*
> *Never let it rest*
> *Until the fast is faster*
> *And the faster's fest*
>
> (Roy 1997, pp. 103–4)

However, others have seen the novel's strength lying precisely in this stylistic and formal unevenness. This deceptively simple account of Estha's sexual abuse, for example, can be shown to employ a range of narrative devices that lend a supreme sophistication to Roy's novel – portmanteau neologisms, capitalizations, a radically unstable narrative voice (the omniscient narrator's but also Estha's, and the eerie chorus that chants a sinister rhyme at the end that does not belong to either), proliferating points of view, and finally, a fusion of the analeptic and the proleptic (this is an event that is in the past of the adult Estha and Rahel, but told as a 'flash-forward' within the story-line that will culminate in the deaths of Sophie Mol and Velutha). These elements make up what Madhu Benoit (1999, p. 99) sees as the 'double-time pattern', involving 'chronological time, or time pertaining to diagesis' and 'a-chronological time, or time pertaining to history'. Benoit sees Roy's narrative as being organized around two juxtaposed time sequences – the thirteen days in 1969 when the twins, Estha and Rahel are seven years old, and one day in June 1992, when they are thirty-one. The analyptic, proleptic and elliptic movements which shift the narrative between these two sequences are further employed within them, producing a temporal zigzag that produces much of the pleasure of this text (Benoit, 1999, p. 101).

Others have agreed on the productivity of this narrative style, but have gone on to contrast its success with Roy's failure to extend it to the thematic content of the novel. Here, Ahmad's analysis can be taken as paradigmatic. Ahmad enthusiastically concedes the pre-eminence of Roy's stylistic moves:

> A key strength of Arundhati Roy is that she has written a novel that has learned all that there is to be learned from modernism, magic realism, cinematic cutting and montage and other such developments of narrative technique in the 20th century, but a novel that nevertheless remains Realist in all its essential features. She knows what Realist fiction always knows: love, grief, remembrance, the absolute indispensability of verisimilitude in depiction of time, place and character, so exact that we who know it to be fiction nevertheless read it as the closest possible kin of fact.
>
> (Ahmad 1997, p. 103)

For Ahmad, Roy is the first Indian writer in English who has used such 'marvellous stylistic resource' to represent a 'provincial, vernacular culture without any effect of exoticism or estrangement'. And, unlike say, Vikram Seth, 'her Realism folds into itself all the plenitude of narrative techniques that the 20th century has spawned' (p. 108). It is a great pity then, for Ahmad, that Roy's radical style is diluted by what he sees as a failure of her political nerve. The central importance given to the illicit romances of Estha and Rahel (incestuous, and thus against family norms) and Ammu and Velutha (across caste lines, and thus against social norms) in the novel achieves, for Ahmad:

> the privatisation of both pleasure and politics, which leads then to sheer aggrandisement of the erotic relation in human life, as a utopic moment of private transgression and pleasure so intense that it transcends all social conflicts of class, caste and race ... This sexual phallocentric utopia then dismisses the historical actuality of the field of politics as either irrelevant or a zone of bad faith.
>
> (p. 104)

Sex in the novel, then, marks Roy's failure to imagine the reality of the collective struggle to achieve social and economic justice that has been a feature of Kerala's recent history.

However, yet another group of readers have refused to endorse Ahmad's diagnosis of the political failures of Roy's novel. For Alex Tickell, Roy provides an example of critical sensibility that, while remaining acutely aware of the grievous shortcomings of the contemporary mantra of globalization and cosmopolitanism, is equally able to distance itself from any uncritical 'nativism'. This she does by combining 'linguistic flexibility, telepathetic child protagonists, and Western form' with 'a mythic-popular content' (Tickell 2003, p. 74). For Tickell, it is this 'mythic-realist' style that is the result of the fusion of the normative realist novel's (western) form and 'local' content that provides the novel's political charge. While all local and regional cultural and political specificities of the novel are always already marked by their commodification within the contemporary global dispensation, Roy is able to offer a vision of agency that cannot always be subsumed under the sign of that commodification. Tickell sees this, in particular, in the attention Roy lavishes on the episode involving *Kathakali* – the dance-drama form peculiar to Kerala – where it is both a reflection of the process by which local cultural forms and their producers are inserted into the global market (just like Roy's novel itself) and a 'set of choices about postcolonial identity' which involves a resistance to this process (pp. 82–4). We shall return to the implications of Tickell's arguments a little later.

In a similar vein, Needham (2005, p. 370) has suggested that Roy's novel is 'embedded in, and draws upon, larger intellectual – theoretical, cultural, political – currents that have acquired prominence in the contemporary historical moment'. In particular, Needham sees Roy's novel both as aligned with and critically distancing itself from the insights of the scholars generally associated with the subaltern studies school of historiography. For example, Needham sees Roy's focus on 'small' stories as opening a critical dialogue with one of the founding figures of the group, Ranajit Guha, and his important essay on the 'small voice of history'. Like Guha, Roy sees hegemonic narratives of history as a part of the life of the state and locates counter-narratives that resist this power in the lives and tales of the disenfranchised people who inhabit the borderlands of class, caste and gender – children, untouchables, divorced women who are denied economic or erotic agency. Yet Needham argues that unlike Guha, Roy does not assume any automatic continuity between women's and other class- and caste-marked 'small voices'. She attends to the specific dynamics of patriarchy: 'she is interested as well not only in the conditions of the former's ["small voices"] emergence and development, but also in how these conditions do not uniformly yield the difference of the subaltern from the dominant' (Needham 2005, p. 380).

So, while Ammu's resistance to patriarchy is expressed in her fierce and unconditional commitment to her children and her 'untouchable' lover Velutha, Roy carefully draws other female figures such as Mammachi and Baby Kochamma who are not only incapable of resistance, but are committed to perfecting their victimhood by actively participating in the violent defence of patriarchal norms. For our purposes, it is crucial to note that it is to Roy's drawing on a variety of 'resources of story-telling in general, and the techniques of the realist novel in particular' that Needham attributes her sophisticated critique of patriarchy and revision of the 'small voice' thesis of the subaltern studies group (ibid.)

Finally, in an article of particular interest to us here, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that Roy's complex politics – 'on the one hand, unveiling the geopolitical structures of colonialism, postcolonialism, and multinationalism; on the other hand, turning a critical searchlight onto India's internal affairs' – is sustained by a particular strategy of organizing her narrative around a poetics of space (Friedman 2005, p. 201). Calling for a return to Bakhtin's understanding of *topo* as a 'co-constituent of narrative along with chronos', Friedman finds in Roy an exemplary practice of what she calls topochronic narrative poetics where the novel's discourse 'privileges space over time, tropes locations as "figures" on the grounds of time' (p. 197). Thus, in Roy's novel, spaces such as the Abhilash Talkies, the History House, the pickle factory and so on, make concrete the continuous histories of colonialism, globalization, class and caste conflicts: 'Rather than history containing space, different spaces in the novel contain history. The novel moves associationally in and out of these spaces, rather than sequentially in linear time, with each location stimulating different fragments of events' (p. 199).

Friedman's attention to the novel's spatialization of its own story is salutary. It draws our attention to the relationship between narrative style and the material reality that this style attempts to embody and mediate. It reorients our attention to history as a complex space-time continuum and encourages us to ask us about the relationship between this and the forms of literary and cultural acts. Friedman outlines the specific historical grounds of Roy's novel very briefly – highlighting Kerala's paradoxical mixture of high rates of literacy, welfare in the health and medical sectors, its stagnating economy, and poor record of land reform directed at the 'untouchable' castes. In what follows we will extend some of the lines of Friedman's argument in order to

see whether we can enrich the concept of what she (after Lawrence Grossberg) calls the novel's 'spatial materialism' by integrating the idea of the environment within it. Can what Friedman calls Roy's spatial poetics be the appropriate style of what we have been calling the environment of postcolonial India?

Be that as it may, both the novel's admirers and detractors agree on the fact that its narrative style – whether it is called 'mythic-realist' or 'topochronic' or 'critical realist' – lies at the heart of the effect it achieves. The signal feature of this style, as Ahmad outlines, is a disjunctive mixture of various realist, modernist and 'mythic' features. I have been suggesting that this uneven style embodies the specific historical unevenness of postcolonial India in general, and Kerala, the novel's chosen ground, in particular. Let us now briefly examine the contours of this ground.

'No language to do it in'

A contemporary global reality so complex and contradictory that it constantly threatens to overwhelm all available literary and linguistic forms – this is a theme that Roy has spoken of frequently. At the Hague, attending an international forum on water resources she claims to have witnessed:

> the ritualistic slaughter of language as I know and understand it ... Every speech was percussive with phrases like 'women's empowerment', 'people's participation' and 'deepening democracy'. Yet it turned out that the whole purpose of the forum was to press for the privatization of the world's water.
>
> (2002, p. 33)

Equally, when thinking about describing contemporary India, Roy finds: 'Truly, literally, there's no language to do it in. This is the real horror of India. The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further and further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing. Not a language. Not even a country' (pp. 36–7).

Roy is attentive to the specific elements of this global (and local) condition that challenges language – a condition of unevenness that throws together people apparently living in different eras. A walk home in Delhi shows her that: 'India lives in several centuries at the same time ... In the lane behind my house, every night I walk past road-gangs of emaciated labourers digging a trench to lay fibre-optic cables to speed up our digital revolution. In the bitter winter cold, they work by the light of a few candles' (pp. 167–8).

As a writer then, what concerns Roy is to find a language and a style that can help us imagine these simultaneous yet non-synchronized ways of being. Mimetic models developed in Europe will have to be, if not rejected out of hand, then stretched to new limits. Note how closely Roy's description of the contemporary condition of India echoes both Trotsky's understanding of combined and uneven development – 'a drawing together of the different stages of the journey, a combining of separate steps, an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms' – and Guha and Gadgil's analysis of the environmental unevenness of the country that we discussed earlier.

Neither can there be much doubt that Arundhati Roy is aware, not only of the unevenness of global material conditions, but also of the cultural conditions that coexist with them. She has written perceptively about the contemporary culture industry:

> We live and prosper in the heart of the marketplace. True, for every so-called success there are hundreds who 'fail'. True, there are a myriad art forms, both folk and classical, myriad languages, myriad cultural and artistic traditions that are being crushed and cast aside in the stampede to the big bumper sale in wonderland.
>
> (pp. 172–3)

But Roy cannot speak of historical or cultural conditions without speaking of the environmental. For her, these are truly interpenetrated categories. The state of democracy in India, for example, can only be assessed via analyses of the environmental impact of the projects such as the Narmada Dam:

> From being a fight over the fate of a river valley, it began to raise doubts about an entire political system. What is at issue now is the very nature of our democracy. Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its forests? Its fish? These are huge questions. They are being taken hugely seriously by the state. They are being answered in one voice by every institution at its command ... in bitter, brutal ways.
>
> (pp. 45–6)

For Roy, the relationship between a state and its citizens – I am tempted to say between the postcolonial state and its citizens – can be properly understood only when we have appreciated it as a matrix of contest

(profoundly unequal) for land, river, forests and fish. Indian cities, the much-trumpeted face of 'India Shining' or 'India Rising' (depending on whether one is listening to Indian right-wing nationalist propaganda or the BBC World Service) reveals itself more properly to Roy as the face of what Mike Davis calls the 'planet of slums':

> The great majority [of the displaced poor] is eventually absorbed into the slums on the periphery of our great cities, where it coalesces into an immense pool of cheap construction labour ... true they're not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They're not captive, but they redefine the meaning of liberty.
>
> (pp. 58–9)[2]

Of course, what is true of India here is also true of, say, Brazil, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Kenya – in short, of the global south – and this is at the very least implied in Roy's analysis of the current dispensation. It seems to me that it may be possible to speak of this condition, where, to a virtually unprecedented degree (as a result of factors such as population distribution, demographics, recent colonial and imperial pasts, continuing neocolonial dynamics, and revolutionary technologies of extraction), the historical condition of unevenness is felt and lived as a toxic environmental condition, as the signature condition of postcoloniality itself. That is to say, a substantial intensification of the experience of the contemporary primarily as a traumatic material and bodily encounter with a hostile and degrading environment – this seems to separate the lives of the global majority (mostly living in Latin America, Africa and Asia) from that of the global minority (mostly living in or between Europe, north America and Australia). It would follow then, confirming the insights of Trotsky via Guha and Gadgil, that this condition of historical-environmental unevenness is the specific 'horizon' of the cultural forms produced in these areas.[3] This understanding then invites us to look more closely at the southern Indian state of Kerala, the 'ground' of Roy's novel.

Ayemenem and Ayamenem

Following Roy's winning of the Booker prize in 1997, the literary tourism industry in Kerala experienced a mini-boom. Local and international operators organized walking tours for tired and slightly bewildered

north American, European, Australian and some Asian and Indian tourists in the small town of Ayamenem – reputed to be the inspiration for Roy's Ayemenem in the novel. R. Krishnakumar, a reporter for the Indian magazine *Frontline*, produced a fascinating study of the contrasts and overlaps between the historical Ayamenem and Roy's fictional town:

> Across the river from Kollenkeril, beyond the Really Deep, one could not see the History House from the stone steps ... The joint-venture Taj Garden Retreat at Kumarakom is a surprise on a mangrove swamp. It was a thatched double-storeyed country house built in 1877 by George Alfred Baker, who belonged to a family of the earliest Protestant missionaries to come to south India in 1737 ... Today the thatched roof has been replaced by a tiled roof, and, as the novel describes it, the old colonial bungalow with its deep verandahs and Doric columns ... is the centre-piece of an elaborate tourism complex ... The Taj Group has sought Heritage Status for its about-to-be 22-room retreat on the lake, which borders the Kumarakom bird sanctuary. Nearby is another private tourism venture which has transplanted about 100 ancestral homes from many parts of the State.
>
> (1997, p. 110)

This mapping of the historical ground of Roy's novel shows how deeply Kerala – 'God's own country', according to its tourism advertisements – is marked both by colonial capital (the English rubber estate) and neocolonial global capital (the 'heritage' hotel site owned by one of India's leading multinational business groups). Rubber (along with coffee), one of the cash crops prioritized by the colonial government to maximize state revenue, contributed to the radical alteration of the ecological balance and livelihood of what Guha and Gadgil call 'ecosystem people' in southern India. The postcolonial state has sanctioned the continuing dispossession of those people and the misappropriation of resources by converting the former rubber estate to a site for an international hotel peddling images of 'traditional' Indian rural harmony and catering to the burgeoning 'eco-tourism' industry.

What is true of Ayamenem seems generally to be true of Kerala (although Kerala seems to have done better than most other Indian states in some respects, thanks partly to the protectionist measures implemented by its state administration). The landmark 1982 Citizen's Report on the Indian environment highlighted the case of the pollution of the Chaliyar river by the Mavoor unit of the Gwalior Rayons company

owned by another of India's leading industrial group – the Birlas. The rampant pollution of the river by untreated industrial chemical waste (including mercury) had serious adverse effects on the ecological health of an entire region and prompted a popular agitation that lasted from 1965–79 (Agarwal et al. 1982, pp. 26–7). The Kerala state government was finally forced to negotiate between the local citizens and the company, which, after 22 years, admitted to causing human and environmental damage, but got away with not having to undertake the appropriate compensatory actions. Similarly, the report picked Kerala out as having a particularly poor record in regard to its forests – the eco-system probably most viciously degraded in independent India. Between 1940 and 1970 Kerala diverted 3500 square kilometres of forest to 'non-forestry purposes' – including the building of dams, forming new agricultural land and opening up new industrial sites. By 1981, Kerala was amongst the top five states contributing to the massive Rs 464 crores national revenue from forestry (pp. 33–4). As a result, Kerala has seen a devastating loss of topsoil, heavy silting of its water resources, and an increasing number of landslides – processes contributing to internal rural migration, loss of livelihood and living space, adverse health problems, and degradation of ecosystems, particularly marine and freshwater.

It is this reality, one that percolates through every lived experience in Kerala (and, indeed, India in general) that informs Roy's novel. It demands not only the thematic inclusion of environment, but also formal and stylistic innovations that can accommodate such historical-environmental unevenness. That is to say, the novel must not only tell a story of a radically altered environment and its relationship with human beings (which it does), but it also has to be an environment in which this story can be told. So thematically, environment is named by Roy's novel as the matrix that enables the collective and individual behavioural logic of the characters. But in order to do this, Roy must stretch the novel's form and style and call upon 'the historical privilege of backwardness'; to this end she uses at least one significant 'archaic' cultural form available to her – Kerala's traditional dance-drama, the *Kathakali*. Thus, formally too, her choice of style and mode of narration themselves call to mind the historical-environmental unevenness of the chosen ground of her storytelling – Kerala.

'Ancestors whispering inside'

Although Roy's novel pays scrupulous attention to historically specific forms of injustice and oppression – colonialism, caste laws, 'globalization',

patriarchy – its core thematic concern may even be called trans-historical: 'civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness' (Roy 1997, p. 308). It is this psychosis of fear that is seen to regulate the regime of borders and classifications, the defiance of which brings brutal retribution on to the 'small' people of the novel – children, 'untouchables', divorced and 'single' women. This drama of loss, courage and brutality is particularized by Friedman's 'topochronic' narrative, where space operates both as an enabling frame and as a key to decoding the characters.

The theme of borders and border-crossings (some licensed and others transgressive) appears in the opening lines of the novel. The monsoon rains seem to dissolve Ayemenem's constitutive borders: 'Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom ... Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways' (p. 1). This confused space, where the 'natural' and the 'cultural' run into one other, provides the precise environment and an interpretative handle for a reading of Rahel and her memories. Walking up to the house where she grew up, Rahel remembers her amorphous childhood where she and Estha, her dizygotic twin brother, routinely crossed the physical, bodily separation between them by sharing each other's consciousness. Rahel recalls waking up at night giggling at Estha's funny dreams, feeling his fear and humiliation while being sexually abused, tasting his sandwiches on the train ride that took him away from his mother and sister. Not only does Rahel's consciousness transcend the physical boundaries between the living, but also those between the living and the dead. She remembers the funeral of her English cousin, Sophie, when she alone could ignore the apparent finality of death and see that Sophie was actually awake, turning cartwheels in her coffin, showing Rahel the painted church ceiling and the baby bats suspended from it. Like Ayemenem in the rain, Rahel's consciousness is premised on the dissolution of all normative boundaries and separations. More than that, it is the particular environment of Ayemenem that enables this. The novel's opening prepares us to read the other 'small' people of the novel – Estha, Ammu, Velutha – as having this in common with Rahel: that they are all compelled to cross normative boundaries within the specific environment of Kerala in the late 1960s and suffer, to varying degrees, grievous losses for it.

Crucially, the environment of the novel is always more than the monsoonal rains. It is also composed of human material and cultural practices that are expressed in the very fabric of the sites that the people

inhabit. Roy provides three startling examples of this in the form of the three houses that the 'small' people move in and out of. Each of these houses simultaneously frames the regime of boundaries and classification and the gestures that transgress them. Take, for example, the abandoned rubber plantation house across the river that Rahel and Estha call the History House. The children light upon this name while listening to their uncle Chacko's Walter Benjamin-like meditation on human, and specifically postcolonial, alienation from history. As Chacko describes history as a house of many rooms, lit by lamps at night, filled with the whispers of ancestors, the children ground this metaphor by imagining it to be the house that was once owned by an Englishman and is now rumoured to be inhabited by his ghost. Their transferring of Chacko's metaphor to the material of history is uncannily accurate both because of what the History House *stands for* and because of what it *stands on*. Built for the colonial profit-making exercise that was the nineteenth-century rubber cultivation in Kerala, it historicizes Chacko's analysis of postcolonial alienation – 'And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war ... A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves' (p. 53). Ancestral whispers are rendered incomprehensible because they remain captured within a space that is both a means and a product of the war of despoliation called colonialism. But the whispers are also alluring, because they speak of a scandal, a scandal of border-crossing – for the History House belonged to Kari Saipu, the Englishman who had 'gone native'. Like the exemplar of this kind of scandalous border-crossing, Joseph Conrad's Kurtz (a comparison deliberately underscored by Roy), Kari Saipu crossed all kinds of borders enforced by the system he served – racial/cultural (by speaking and dressing like a Malyali) and sexual (by taking a young Malyali boy as his lover). He killed himself when his pubescent lover was taken away from him. As a former rubber plantation, then, the History House speaks of the war that colonized Indian minds and bodies. On the other hand, as a haunted house that speaks of sexual and cultural scandals, it is also a site that holds out the possibilities of flouting the very rules that sustained this kind of colonization. It is appropriate then, that it is in the History House that the postcolonial drama of transgression and enforcement is staged. Ammu and Velutha meet there at night to break the love laws that patrol caste boundaries. The children escape there to seek shelter from the dreadful fallout of the discovery of Ammu and Velutha's transgression. Their cousin Sophie accidentally drowns during their escape. The police – inheritors and keepers of the flame of colonial

order in independent India – trace the children to their hideout, and discover Velutha there. Their slow, methodical torture of Velutha is described as 'History in Live Performance'.

> 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 ... they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak.
>
> (p. 309)

For this dialectics between the reinforcement and transgression of borders, the History House is the site par excellence.

Similarly, the Ipe's house in Ayemenem physically expresses and produces the apartheid logic of patriarchy and colonialism. Built by the male head of a family favoured by the colonial regime in the nineteenth century for both their class and cultural prestige (they own considerable amounts of land and are Christians who host the 'soft' power of colonialism manifested in the missionaries), the house is a crucial part of an environment that endows a degrading subjectivity on the 'small people' who come within its ambit. The mood it radiates is that of the world-weary patriarch: 'Like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life.' Its physical form is dedicated to the stifling of all expressions of life for the benefit and preservation of the male line. So, its architecture splits and disembodies women: 'The doors had not two, but four shutters of panelled teak so that in the old days, ladies could keep the bottom half closed, lean their elbows on the ledge and bargain with visiting vendors without betraying themselves below the waist' (p. 165). At the same time, it enables the smooth and discrete flow of female services, including sexual services, to satisfy the 'manly needs' of the male heirs while maintaining the codes of respectability:

> Mammachi had a separate entrance built for Chacko's room, which was at the eastern end of the house, so that the objects of his 'Needs' wouldn't have to go traipsing through the house. She secretly slipped them money to keep them happy. They took it because they needed it. They had young children and old parents.
>
> (p. 169)

The past and the present here are paradoxically linked through the spatial division of the house that ensures the continuity of patriarchal privileges. The location of the Ayemenem house also speaks of the continuities between old and new colonialisms. Like the History House, it is supported by lands and rubber plantations purchased during the nineteenth century which contributed to the economy of British colonialism and confirmed the power of the *compradore* classes. In the new world of post-independence India, it houses Chacko's pickle factory (wrested and expanded from Mammachi's more modest local enterprise) which seeks to be a small part of the national effort to integrate the country into a globalized economy. The logo of Paradise Pickles and by extension, that of the Ayemenem house, is now a crudely painted *Kathakali* dancer with the legend 'emperors of the realm of taste' emblazoned beside it. Its products represent the commodification of exotic regional flavours for international markets, and as such it constitutes itself as the latest avatar of the old colonial logic of wealth circulation.

In contrast, Roy gives us a glimpse of a 'small house' that speaks of a distinct environment and a habitation that opposes the politics of 'largeness'. This is the house of Velutha, the 'untouchable' friend of the children and, fatally, the lover of their mother. Unlike the Ayemenem house or the History House's spatial expression of the logic of apartheid, Velutha's hut speaks of and enables practices of integration, inclusion and equity. Next to the river and hemmed in by a huddle of trees, 'it nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret'. But this is no Indian Walden, or the site of some idyllic Thoreau-like expression of a 'natural' retreat. It contains two maimed beings – Velutha's paralysed brother Kuttappen, and their half-blind father, Vellya Paapen. Kuttappen and Vellya Paapen's mutilations are the direct result of the ways in which their physical labour was extracted during and after colonialism. Vellya Paapen lost his sight to a stray stone chip while working under typically gruelling conditions and Kuttappen lost the use of his legs in a workplace accident when he fell out of a tree. The hut is a physical expression of such tragedies – the first thing one sees on entering is the white plastic bottle and tube that collects the immobile Kuttappen's urine. It is decorated with things salvaged from the rubbish bins of the Ayemenem house – a broken clock, discarded biscuit tins, tacky posters – which express both the tenacity and the degradation of its occupants' destitute lives.

Yet the hut is also marked by a complete lack of the kind of regulatory regime that dictates the lives of the inhabitants of the Ayemenem house. Inside, it is dark but clean, smelling of the children's favourite fish curry and wood smoke. There are no keys or cupboards to lock. A small door leads to a courtyard where Velutha does his carpentry. The family hen comes in and out of this door. The space is redolent of an intimate flow between work and life. Indeed, this is where the children take their secret boat and repair it with the help of Velutha, united in a moment of complete absorption in their common labour: 'The sandpaper was divided into exactly equal halves, and the twins fell to work with an eerie concentration that excluded everything else. Boat-dust flew around the room and settled on hair and eyebrows. On Kuttappen like a cloud, on Jesus like an offering' (p. 213).

Velutha's hut then, speaks of and produces the mixture of degradation, dignity and defiance that characterizes Velutha himself. The maimed human beings it shelters and the cast-off rubbish with which it is decorated are consistent with the logic of the world outside the hut where the 'untouchables' are brutally marginalized by a thoroughly efficient economic and cultural regime. But its spatial logic also produces a solidarity that defies such regimes. It produces the dignity of Velutha and shows why he, despite the volume and strength of insurmountable prejudice, could momentarily break out of the enforced ghettoes of 'untouchability'. The carpentry station and tools testify to the skills that got him noticed, first by Mammachi and then by a German carpenter visiting a local mission. It is his experience as a carpenter and as a skilled mechanic that made Velutha a prized worker at Chacko's pickle factory. This in turn, led to the growth of his political sensibilities, his joining of the local communist party, and his deep but fierce commitment to the fight against the forces of privilege. The room in his hut, bringing together all visitors and inhabitants in an equitable embrace, expresses and enables Velutha's sensibility.

Ultimately, of course, it is the 'big' houses and their regulatory regimes that succeed in snuffing out the spirit of Velutha's house. Velutha and Ammu pay for their transgressions with their lingering painful deaths in spaces of confinement and torture. The police cell where Velutha dies, naked, broken and smeared in his own filth makes concrete a specific kind of power and its frightful capacities:

> Someone switched on the light. Bright. Blinding. Velutha appeared on the scummy, slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp. He was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone ... Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright, bare electric bulb reflected it.
>
> (pp. 319–20)

Unlike Velutha's hut, the police cell is not dark. But it can only illuminate an inhumane modernity. Ammu, too, dies alone – a castaway on the double grounds of sexual transgression and economic marginalization. Expelled from her house by her brother, separated from her children, ill and desperately looking for any job that would enable her to try and get them back, she is in a grimy room in a nondescript hotel on the eve of an interview for the position of a secretary. At night, in her dreams, the cramped room becomes populated with nightmarish policemen with scissors who hack off all her hair, a traditional practice of 'naming and shaming' prostitutes in Kerala. She dies gripped in a state of fear similar to that experienced by Velutha, if not physically broken in the same manner – 'She didn't know where she was, she recognized nothing around her. Only her fear was familiar ... This time the steely fist never loosened its grip. Shadows gathered like bats in the steep hollows near her collarbone' (pp. 161–2).

These houses and cells are intricately specified spaces that define the nodal points at which the natural and the cultural continuities of environment become visible. Roy carefully outlines the political and economic forces – colonial, postcolonial or neo-colonial – that shape this environment; typically through an account of the kind of labour and the kind of wealth that is produced, circulated and appropriated. Thus, it is never possible to read the environment in this novel – be it concretized in monsoons, trees, rubber plantations, cities, rivers and so on – as standing outside or beyond the processes of history. It is never the background, or mere thematic prop to the human story. Rather, environment is at once the code that helps us to read and understand the specific histories of the characters and the force that produces and reproduces the historical conditions that are expressed through those character's actions. It is this understanding that sharpens the novel's critique of the contemporary Indian dispensation.

If the story of Pappachi, Mammachi and the Ayemenem house tells of the colonial organization of life, the tragic events of 1969 that involve the children, Ammu, Velutha, Chacko, Margaret and Sophie are equally eloquent expressions of the postcolonial life of a still relatively newly independent nation. With Estha and Rahel's return in 1991, we are ushered into the next stage of Kerala and India's development in the era of the post-Fordist global capitalism often crudely known as 'globalization' (as if this had not always been the tendency of historical capital over the past five or six hundred years). Within and outside India, the neo-liberal mantra endlessly circulated without much critical analysis presents this as a kind of utopian border-crossing available to all the

citizens of the world who sign up to its prescription of 'structural adjustments' and the corporatization of economic and political processes. Roy's novel punctures this myth by showing it to be a continuation of the despoliation and degradation of the Indian environment and peoples that had accelerated under colonialism and has now taken on an unprecedented velocity. The rhetoric of effortless border-crossing is shown to reinforce the age-old borders that shut out the smell of poverty from the sensitive noses of the privileged. Globalization wafts out of the dying river Meenachal, encrusted with filth and pesticide bought with World Bank loans: 'Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils.' Globalization enforces a spatial unevenness where 'Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places' jostled against older 'resentful houses tinged green with envy' (p. 13). Globalization converts the History House into a five-star international leisure complex attracting international tourists eager to sample the delights of 'traditional' Kerala – a 'tradition' now manufactured by transplanting old family houses around Kari Saipu's bungalow to make a 'Heritage Hotel' criss-crossed by artificial canals and toy boats. The entire angle of this reinvented History House is thrust towards the logic of apartheid – the hotel guests arrive not through Ayemenem, but are ferried straight from Cochin on speedboats along a route that is carefully designed to deny them a glimpse of the people who live there. Once there, they are walled off from the river and the town:

> The view from the hotel was beautiful, but here too the water was thick and toxic. *No Swimming* signs had been put up in stylish calligraphy. They had built a tall wall to screen off the slum and prevent in from encroaching on Kari Saipu's estate. There wasn't much they could do about the smell.
>
> (p. 125)

In keeping with Roy's understanding of what environment is, the environmental degradation that globalization brings has its logical extension in human and cultural degradation. As the hotel guests loll around the pools and enjoy sublimated sexual games, they are treated to *Kathakali* dance performances where 'ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos.' That this cultural amputation also leads to the drastic diminution

of the human is seen in how the dancers themselves feel: 'On their way back from the Heart of Darkness, they stopped at the temple to ask the pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives' (p. 229).

Globalization climbs out of the ether and into the satellite dishes that have mushroomed all over Ayemenem. The colonization of minds that Chacko had spoken about in the 1960s is now performed through the agencies of American soap operas, wrestling and fashion shows. This worlding has a literally paralysing effect on Ayemenem as seen most spectacularly in the case of Baby Kochamma. As she is gradually hypnotized by the spectacle of 'Blondes, wars, famines, football, sex, music ... whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton', she passes into an increasingly immobile senility. Her physical corpulence is heightened by the make-up and jewellery she takes to wearing in a hideous parody (and imitation) of a vanished youth. The very size and shape of the satellite dish that is the conduit for this globalization is a reminder of the structural inequality that is its hallmark – 'It *looked* large enough for people to live in. Certainly it was bigger than a lot of people's homes. Bigger, for instance, than Kochu Maria's cramped quarters' (p. 188). Baby Kochmma and her servant Kochu Maria may seem united in their mutual partaking of television's worldly delights, but the very shape of the conduit of this globalization underscores the distance between them. We again see its divisive logic in another scene of arrival – in the airport where scores of Indian workers who form the backbone of the remittance economy of Kerala return from their joyless overseas workplaces to be reunited with their families:

> And there they were, the Foreign Returnees, in wash'n'wear suits and rainbow sunglasses. With an end to grinding poverty in their Aristocrat suitcases. With cement roofs for their thatched houses ... With love and a lick of shame that their families were so so ... so ... gawkish. *Look at the way they dressed! Surely they had more suitable airport wear! Why did the Malayalees have such awful theeth?*
>
> (p. 140)

Border-crossing here produces and is a production of a process of division, alienation and degradation. It takes place in the context of an environment which is always characterized by signs of decay

A great merit of Roy's novel is that it refuses to corral the debilitating effects of globalization exclusively within postcolonial spaces. Rahel's sojourn in Washington helps reveal the global scale of degradation that

globalization achieves. We see that America is not the nirvana in which the dreams of globalization are lived by the blessed ones, but an ordinary, broken space infested with ordinary nightmares. Rahel compares Ayemenem to Washington during one of her walks:

> *Around now*, Rahel thought, *if this were Washington, I would be on my way to work. The bus ride. The streetlights. The gas fumes ... The clatter of coins pushed towards me in the metal tray. The smell of money on my fingers. The punctual drunk with sober eyes who arrives exactly at 10 p.m.: 'Hey, you! Black bitch! Suck my dick!'*
>
> (p. 187)

Global television brings the spectacle of global war to the small people. On Baby Kochamma's television set we can see American policemen handcuffing a bloodied teenager, watched by his fearful and wasted mother. The boy screams 'I'm fifteen years old and I wish I were a better person than I am. But I'm not. Do you want to hear my pathetic story?' at the camera that strips him of all his dignity even as it turns him into a commodity for consumption by a global audience. Rahel in Washington and the unnamed young victim of American state brutality are joined in the novel by Velutha, by the insane Muralidharan, Kuttappen and the women workers in Chacko's factory to form a truly global army of the destitute and the broken. The unevenness of globalization blights the whole world, but each blighted corner of this world has a specific story to tell.

The systemic logic of victimization and oppression is expressed in the individual environment that Roy scrupulously builds around each character. Baby Kochamma's garden, for example, is a perfect expression of her lost hopes and a mind crushed by the patriarchal codes of civility, religion and respectability. Her desire for control and agency, as a compensation for what is denied to her, shapes the dwarf hedges, the gargoyles, and the rigid order of mottled black or blood-red flowers. Her labour in the garden is an attempt to control space and other forms of life just as she herself has been controlled: 'Like a lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava' (pp. 26–7). As with all of Roy's spaces, this garden is an environment that is simultaneously produced and productive. Its physical form is dictated by Baby Kochamma's needs, but the more she labours on it the more she internalizes its logic of regimentation, and her furious reaction to Ammu's affair and her

poisonous attempts to control Estha and Rahel replicate her relationship to her garden (and later, her television). Similarly, the Orangedrink Lemondrink man's brutal sexual attack on Estha takes place in the Abhilash Talkies, the cinema hall that peddles sublimated sexual dreams through 'world hits' such as *The Sound of Music*. As he forces Estha to masturbate him, the soda-seller quizzes him about his family, the rhythm of the masturbation increasing with Estha's revelations about his belonging to an elite, land-holding, factory-owning family. The class resentment that finds expression in this act of abuse has specific local connotations, but it is also conditioned by the space of the cinema hall, which taunts the casual labourers who service it with unreachable dreams of global bliss enjoyed by rich blondes in their alpine palaces.

Conversely, the rebellious gestures of the 'small people' can only take place within enabling environments. Velutha's hut we have already looked at. The episode of the *Kathakali* dancers provide us with another example of an enabling, historicized environment. After degrading themselves for money in front of the tourists at the Heritage Hotel, the dancers return to a temple for an expiatory performance. Unlike the hotel, the temple is not a part of the global circuit of commodified regional exotica, and hence lacks its gleam – 'everything was white-walled, moss-tiled and moonlit. Everything smelled of the recent rain.' A thin priest lies curled up in a corner, and the old temple elephant sleeps beside a steaming pile of its own dung. But it is precisely this site of what Raymond Williams would call residual culture where the dancers can stage their counter-performance, one that does not cater to the tourist's short attention span, that cannot be exchanged for dollars, that tells the ancient epics and great stories through the idiom of twitching muscles, impossible leaps and blurs of movement. Roy describes the relationship between this art and the artists in both spatial and temporal terms – the stories are the houses that the dancer lives in; they are his children as well as his childhood (pp. 229–30). Within the space of the temple, outside (however temporarily) the reaches of global capital, he can inhabit his stories properly: 'This story is the safety net above which he swoops and dives like a brilliant clown in a bankrupt circus ... It is his colour and his light. It is the vessel into which he pours himself. It gives him shape. Structure. It harnesses him. It contains him' (p. 231). The dancer is fused with the dance, or as Roy puts it, his body becomes his soul. Like Velutha and the children repairing the boat in Velutha's courtyard, labour here is non-alienated, restoring a moment of dignity to the labourer albeit within a certain environment and a certain space. It is the hut or the decaying temple discarded by the Midas touch of

global development where this kind of redemption is still available. But, like all redemption, this can only confer momentary grace. Roy's is too acute an eye to produce a vision of untainted tradition that can be juxtaposed to some upstart globalized modernity. The tradition embodied in the labour of the *Kathakali* dancers is also, as the Love Laws tell us, one of violent inequity. The ancient epics they dance are saturated with patriarchal violence. And at dawn, after their dance is over, the men take their make-up off and go home to beat their wives.

Environment, in Roy's novel, is a fusion of the natural and the cultural that is painstakingly historicized, frequently through accounts of modes of labour. It acquires thematic importance as both expression and productive condition of the action of the characters. But this historicized environment, one that is particular to colonial and postcolonial uneven development, also enters the formal shaping of the novel. It is to this that we now turn.

'His body is his soul'

Our use of the environmental key provided by Roy decisively alters the register in which the novel can be read. For example, what appeared to be primarily a tale of tragic cross-caste romance and loss of childhood innocence (in other words, the story of Estha, Rahel, Ammu and Velutha) can now be read as a tale of dispossession of a different kind where Velutha assumes a central role. His institutionalized marginalization can now be seen as a consequence of his being caught at a transit point between the categories of what Guha calls 'ecosystem people' and 'ecorefugees'. With globalization literally poisoning the river Meenacahal, people such as Velutha have to sever their symbiotic relationship with it and increasingly take up casual employment in small-scale urban enterprises like Chacko's. As such, they are at the point of leaving their degrading feudal relationship with the traditional ruling classes, and are about to enter into an (equally degrading) relationship with the 'new' elites. Thus, we can no longer read Velutha's doomed romance with Ammu as merely another click in the traditional cycle of Indian caste violence. Instead, the dynamics of caste is revealed to us as unequal competition for resources in a regime of development that effectively entrenches the marginalization of the oppressed. Ammu and Velutha's romance is a protest (however limited) against this historical process.

But here I would like to turn to the question of how this story can be told, which is another way of asking how the postcolonial novel form embodies this historical-environmental condition of unevenness. I want

to cast another, longer, look at the episode of the *Kathakali* dancers we touched upon earlier, Roy enters into a meta-fictional discussion even as Estha and Rahel, now adults, come face to face with each other in the temple where the dancers perform. As the twins watch each other and the dance, the narrator zooms in on the main actor, the *Kathakali* man – whose traditional livelihood is now threatened by the ever-expanding forest of satellite television antennae:

> To the Kathakali Man these stories are his children and his childhood. He has grown up with them. They are the house he was raised in, the meadows he played in. They are his windows and his way of seeing. So when he tells a story, he handles it as he would a child of his own ... The Kathakali Man is the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul.
>
> (pp. 229–30)

We have already discussed how the material environment of the temple enables the dancers to perform a labour that is a protest against the globalization that commodifies them and their art. Such performative fusion may remain beyond the scope of Roy, who, at least in her incarnation as a novelist, is firmly embedded within the circuits of the global flow of cultural capital (the Booker prize, the exoticized and eminently marketable 'Indian novel in English' and so on). Her narrative, however, can absorb some of the archaic generic codes of *Kathakali*.

In his history of the *Kathakali* dance-drama, Phillip Zarelli (2000) traces the development of this art form from the seventeenth century onwards. He shows how various formal mutations within the *Kathakali* genre embodied the social, political and environmental realities that enveloped it. In particular, his later chapters offer a fascinating study of how specific performative gestures were altered or new gestures created in response to drastic environmental changes in postcolonial and, more recently, globalized India. From Zarelli's discussion of the basic stylistic and formal aspects of the *Kathakali* dance-drama, I pick out three as being important to Roy's novel – those pertaining to the temporality, levels and sources of narration.

The striking thing about the discrepancy between the text and the performance of *Kathakali*, Zarelli says, is the lack of any linear chronological development (p. 40). This deliberate refusal of a linear progression in the chronology and sequence of the story is performed by a complex narrative arrangement: 'the narrative sections of the text set in third-person, usually composed in Sanskrit metrical verses known as *sloka* (or the slightly different form known as *dandaka)*' and the first-person dialogue and soliloquy passages (*padam)* 'composed in a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam as dance music for delivery and interpretation by the actors'. Descriptive passages link sets of poetic images that clarify the main themes and the narrative and dialogue are set to specific musical modes (p. 41). Further, the delivery of the dialogues themselves demands a close collaboration between the actors and the singer:

> in the first delivery of the line, as the vocalists sing the line through, the actor enacts what might be called the 'subtext' of the line; in the second delivery of the line, as the actor 'speaks' each word of the line in gesture-language, the vocalists sing the line over and over again through a set number of rhythmic cycles.
>
> (p. 45)

The combination of non-linear chronology and complex, interactive and multiple narratorial levels have a direct effect on the characters in the *Kathakali* stories. As Zarelli puts it – 'The "character" is always there but, simultaneously, can also be temporally put in "parenthesis" in the sense that the character is "set aside" from time to time ... In this structural sense, a *kathakali* performance is not attempting to create the "illusion of reality" happening in "real time"' (p. 88). In other words, what is eschewed by *Kathakali* dance-drama is the principle of classical realism.

As an Indian novelist working within the global market of English-language fiction, Roy may seem to be located at the very opposite of a local art form like *Kathakali* and its practitioners, however they might run the risk of incorporation within that same market. Yet it is striking how, in their discussions of the novel's formal and stylistic unevenness, critics have picked up the very qualities that appear to be central to *Kathakali's* art – multiple and shifting narrative levels, non-linear chronology and characters that refuse to be assimilated into a production of 'an illusion of reality in real time'. And indeed, there are passages in the novel that seem explicitly to borrow *Kathakali* narrative techniques:

> *Finish the drink.*
> *Watch the picture.*
> *Think of all the poor people.*
> *Lucky rich boy with porketmunny. No worries*
> Estha sat up and watched. His stomach heaved. He had a green-wavy, thick-watery, lumpy, seaweedy, floaty, bottomless-bottomful feeling...

> Past the Audience again (legs thiswayandthat). Last time to sing. This time to try and vomit. Exit through the EXIT.
>
> (Roy 1997, p. 107)

What is the chorus of disembodied voices at the beginning of this episode but the *Kathakali* musicians setting the 'background' that will excavate the deeper meanings that lie behind the character's actions? The interaction of the mother-child dialogue with a third-personal narrative position that is simultaneously the child's, his twin's and omniscient replicates the *Kathakali* technique of harmonizing the *padam* and the *sloka*. Even the linguistic innovations remind us of the interplay between the vernacular Malayalam and the classical Sanskrit in *Kathakali* recitations. The result of these stylistic moves for Roy's novel, as in *Kathakali* performances, is a refusal of the illusion of reality happening in real time, that is to say, as Ahmad noted, a stretching of the form of the realist novel. Roy uses the *Kathakali* episode at simultaneously thematic and formal levels. At the level of theme, the dance performance names a protest against the blind neo-colonial forces of globalization that ruthlessly commodify all forces of life in contemporary Kerala and India. In respect to the plot, it is the occasion of the twins coming face to face, after years of worldly roaming, on their native ground to achieve a measure of redemption. At the level of form, *Kathakali* is the archaic form that fuses with that of the contemporary novel, enabling it to embody the material reality of postcolonial environment. The stylistic and formal unevenness of Roy's novel emerges as the appropriate environment in which this story of dispossession of the 'small' people can be narrated. The postcolonial novel emerges as the form of historical uneven development.

Clearly, there is nothing new about observations on generic and stylistic unevenness, discontinuities and the open-ended nature of postcolonial or indeed any other literary and cultural genre. As Derrida puts it 'a text would not *belong* to any genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging' (1980, p. 230). And if texts always participate in several generic codes, the novel form in particular, as Bakhtin pointed out long ago, is particularly adept at absorbing various kinds of cultural forms, genres and voices in order to trigger its reality effect (1981, p. 263). If the amalgamated framework of combined and uneven development and social ecology enabled us to do no more than detect Roy's novel's absorption of, say, the generic techniques of *Kathakali*, it would only be confirming

established genre theories and narratologies. However, I believe that an environmental-historical approach to Roy's novel focuses our attention on the conditions under which genres mutate, cultural forms absorb each other's generic codes, and forms such as the novel are able to absorb other cultural voices. It suggests that it is not enough to place Cesaire's 'marvellous real' or Rushdie's 'chutnification' or Roy's 'uneven realism' against, say, the political events of the twentieth-century Caribbean and a globalized postcolonial India. We have to look at how these styles and forms themselves reproduce the material environment of historical unevenness within which these stories can be told. So, if we observe that the use of prolepses and analepses by Roy increases the discrepancies between the story order and text order, what Genette calls 'anachronies' or the loosening of the relationship between the 'first narrative' and the 'second narrative', we must both analyse how the novel does it by absorbing *Kathakali* techniques and by determining what historical conditions permit or compel such a move (Genette 1980, p. 48). It is in the framing of these conditions that the environment, always understood as a continuous and complex flow between the human and the non-human, enters as an irreplaceable category.

Notes

Introduction

1. I am not going into the vast literature on the different inflections of the term 'postcolonial' here. But I would like to note that the conceptualization of 'postcolonial' as a historical period and a marker of a particular stage in the formation of a world system of unevenly distributed capital yields two further related, but *cultural* concepts, that Graham Huggan (2001) calls 'postcolonialism' and 'postcoloniality'. For Huggan, the former is 'an anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the fault lines of literary and cultural texts', while the latter is 'a regime of cultural value [which] is compatible with a worldwide market whose power now "extends over the whole range of cultural production"' (p. 6). Huggan's conceptualization is useful in that it presents the varied and distinctive cultural correlates of the historical-material condition that we are calling 'postcolonial', and reveals the dynamics of contradiction inherent in them. We shall try to keep this distinction in mind when we further discuss the range of cultural texts and the regime of the marketplace in which they operate.

1. From Earth Day to Earth Summits: Trajectories and Debates

1. In addition to *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982), also see his *Our Synthetic Environment* (1963) and *Towards an Ecological Society* (1980) for an elaboration of his theory of 'social ecology'.
2. For a sample of these critical approaches, see Adamson et al., *The Environmental Justice Reader* (2002) and three of Mike Davis's hugely varied body of work – *Ecology of Fear* (1998), *Late Victorian Holocausts* (2001) and *Planet of Slums* (2007).

2. 'Green Postcolonialism' and 'Postcolonial Green'

1. We should note that concern with the proper 'grounding' and 'location' of postcolonial theory kept emerging and cannot always be read as metaphoric flourishes. For example, Stuart Hall's famous essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' emphasized the territorial specificity of (Caribbean) postcolonial subjectivity – 'The Third, "New World" presence, is not so much power, as ground, place, territory. It is the juncture-point where the many cultural tributaries meet, the "empty" land (the European colonisers emptied it) where strangers from every other part of the globe collided' (Hall 1996, p. 118).
2. See Huggan, 'Decolonizing the Map', Hodge and Mishra, 'Aboriginal Place', Malcolm Lewis, 'Indigenous Map Making', Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', Said, 'The Mind of Winter', Carter, 'Spatial History' and Huggan, 'The Postcolonial Exotic', all collected in Ashcroft et al. (2006).

3. See, for example, Lawrence Buell's periodization of cultural and literary eco-/environmentalism in his *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005).
4. See Dirlik (1997); Ahmad (1994); Lazarus (1999 and 1991); and Parry (2004).
5. Buell suggests that 'The first-second distinction should not, however, be taken as implying a tidy, distinct succession. Most currents set in motion by early ecocriticism continue to run strong ... In this, "palimpest" would be a better metaphor than "wave"' (Buell 2005, p. 17).

3. Towards Eco-Materialism

1. For Timpanaro (1975), the anti-materialism within Marxism rises from a schism within Marx's own thinking. In what he calls 'early Marx' – up to *German Ideology* – Timpanaro does not find historical materialism proper. It is in the 'later' Marx – of *Capital* and beyond – that historical materialism, always already infused with an environmental perspective, is fleshed out as a conceptual category. For Timpanaro, subsequent European philosophical preference for the 'early' and not the 'later' Marx resulted in the weak or anti-materialist reactions.
2. Brennan suggests that on the one hand, postcolonial criticism's origins in the specific political and material conditions of late 1970s and 1980s US academia meant that it harboured the liberationist motifs and language it had derived from the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. On the other hand, the extreme conservatism that prevailed (and continues to do so) in the US academy meant that it purchased its place there with an active hostility towards the theoretical and political traditions of those same anticolonial struggles.
3. See for example, Lenin's elaboration of the theoretical directions found in Engels in his *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (Moscow: 1977) and *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (Peking: 1975).

4. The River and the Dance: Arundhati Roy

1. This is not the place to recount the details of the Narmada Bachao Andolan ('Save the Narmada' campaign). Suffice to say that since the late 1980s, the attempts of the governments of the Indian states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to construct a series of dams on the river Narmada has been met with one of the largest and best-coordinated popular movements in recent history. There has been a veritable flood of literature on the struggle: see Claude Alvarez and Ramesh Billorey (1987), Phillipe Cullet (2007) and Dilip D'Souza (2002). For a study of the economic and environmental effects of the large dam projects at a global scale, see Patrick McCully (1996).
2. 'India Shining' was the much-vaunted electoral slogan of the right-wing Indian Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2004. It brought them a comprehensive electoral defeat. 'India Rising' was a week-long series of special reports that ran on the BBC World Service radio in 2007. These are just random samples of a stereotypical packaging of India as one of the world's leading economic success stories. For a more accurate account of the state of play, see Davis (2007).

3. I am using 'horizon' in the sense Fredric Jameson uses the term in the opening chapter of *Political Unconscious* – 'The book ... conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today ... but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation' (2002, p. 1). What Jameson means by the political, I suggest, must fold within itself a concept of the environmental, to properly become itself.

5. Water/Land: Amitav Ghosh

1. For example, see Bose's analysis of Ghosh's work (2003, p. 15) – 'he is also the one who sees history as that trajectory of events that causes dislocations, disjunctions, movements and migrations, eventually replacing solid markers with shadow lines, destabilizing our notions of the past in the reverberations of the present'.
2. See especially his recent essays 'Folly in the Sudarbans' and 'The Tsunami of 2004', http://www.amitavghosh.com/essays/index.php (accessed 5 August 2009).

7. 'Blood on my Water': Ruchir Joshi

1. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war, for instance, is routinely explained in terms of conflicting national interests, neo-imperialism, 'Cold War' politics, ethnicity, race and so on. But its roots lay at least as much in 'water politics' as it did in these other factors. The head-waters of the Jordan river and the lower reaches of the Litani river have always been seen by Israeli policymakers as crucial to the existence of Israel as a Zionist state. When Syria began building dams and canals (legally, well within its own territory), Israeli leaders saw it as an existential threat and began preparing for war. Shimon Peres explicitly stated water as a cause of the conflict and Levi Eshkol declared 'This water is like blood in our veins.' See de Villiers (2001, pp. 220–4). Much of Israel's subsequent conflict with Lebanon can also be properly understood as an attempt to secure the Litani river, and much of the logic of its occupation of Palestinian lands in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the building of the illegal settlements, is derived from the imperative to secure and manage water flows.
2. See Benjamin's two essays on photography and aura, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' and 'Little History of Photography' (Benjamin 2008).
3. I am not entering into the various controversies about the first 'Indian' novel here, but I am concerned with the writing and production of English-language novels in India. On the history of photography in India see Thomas (1981), Dehejia (2001) and Pinney (1998). On the early English novel in India see Joshi (2003) and Darnton (2002).
4. For an elaboration, see Fabian (1983). For an important application of the notion of coeval modernity in the field of historical scholarship, also see Harry Harootunian (2000).

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