


A THIRD SPACE OF LOVE

Lucia GROSU

***Introduction***

Recently translated into Romanian, *The God of Small Things*, the Indian writer Arundhati Roy's novel, has surprised readers with a story about love and loss, about boundaries and transgressions, about *small things* that suddenly become central events in the characters' destinies. The writer herself states in one interview that the novel is not concerned with the vast Indian themes, but that her main interest is the depiction of "insect life" which accidentally takes place in Ayemenem-Kerala, and could as well be happening in any other corner of the world. Roy writes a novel about the *small* detail in human existence, yet she cannot escape her cultural and social roots which eventually help shaping the plot of the book into a narrative regarding the *big* Indian issues. Roy makes use of a local scenario in order to elaborate a greater representation of the post-colonial Indian setting. Her novel can be considered a hybrid text since it is simultaneously contaminated by the two contexts, the Indian and the British. By choosing to express herself in English, Arundhati Roy is in an advantageous position. According to Braj Kachru.

English does have one clear advantage, attitudinally and linguistically: it has acquired a neutrality in a linguistic context where native languages, dialects, and styles sometimes have acquired undesirable connotations. Whereas native codes are functionally marked in terms of caste, religion, and so forth, English has no such 'markers', at least in the non-native context (1995: 292).

I believe this explanation is appropriate in Roy's case since she herself pleads for a neutrality of her writing in the sense that *The God of Small Things* should not be read as a story bound to the context in which it is set but as a tale about "human nature"¹.

In her endeavour to depict "the little events and ordinary things"² she describes the lives of a series of couples which she reunites in a genealogy. The life of the Kochamma family appears after a more careful consideration as an illustration of Big India. Through the story's plot, Roy passes from the local to the general succeeding to hide the specifically regional topics behind the agitated existence of the Kochamma couples.

At the top of the genealogical tree there are Mammachi and Pappachi followed by their children Ammu and Chacko. The family tree is completed by Pappachi's sister, Baby Kochamma, and the three grandchildren: the twins Esthappen (a boy) and Rahel (a girl), Ammu's children and Sophie Mol, Chacko's daughter. The main events of the book oscillate between present day India and 1969, between adult Rahel's return to India and the days when Sophie Mol died drowned. These two events form the core of the book around which the author creates the web of details concerning five male-female relationships: Mammachi and Pappachi, Baby Kochamma and Father Mulligan, Chacko and Margaret Kochamma, Ammu and Velutha and Estha and Rahel.

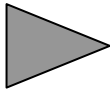
The couples in the novel are conceived following the pattern of the love-hate relationship which represents a human bond established between individuals who are initially separated by an embedded conflict and who trespass all boundaries in order to be together. The outcome of such a venture is envisaged by Roy as fruitless and leading only to suffering, isolation and ultimately to loss of life;

¹ Arundhati Roy quoted on <http://website.lineone.net/~jon.simmons/roy/>, date of access: 03.06.2005, website designed and edited by Jon Simmons.

² *ibid*



according to Julia Kristeva this is “death’s immanent presence within love”(Kristeva, 1987: 213).

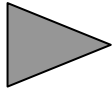


Breaking “love laws”

Almost all the couples in the novel are brought together and eventually separated by the same causes: the cultural, religious or social conflicts existing between individuals. The characters challenge their social, cultural and religious conditions in order to fulfill their emotional destiny and in the process they entirely disregard the boundaries set by the *love laws*, “the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.” (Roy, 1997: 33). This is a concept created by Roy to stand for a plethora of rules and regulations that her characters choose to ignore: caste, religion, nationality, gender, they are all involuntarily or deliberately disregarded.

The Ammu-Velutha couple (like all the other couples in the book) follows the love-hate pattern, the Romeo and Juliet one, as they are brought together by the very fact that they belong to two different social categories: Ammu comes from a respected Christian Touchable (Brahmin) family, while Velutha is an Untouchable (an Out-Caste), a Paravan. Their extremely passionate love story will end tragically with Velutha’s violent death and the slow destruction of Ammu’s hope and, ultimately, life.

Taking into consideration the Indian social specificities regarding caste and status, the love relationship between Roy’s characters, Ammu and Velutha, appears the more shocking. The possibility for a Brahmin woman to engage in a passionate relationship with an Untouchable in real life is inconceivable.



Creating a Third Space of Love

Arundhati Roy tears down the boundaries of caste affiliation in order to set the foundations of a new space, a Third Space³ of Love, a space deprived of social inequalities and *love laws*. This is an in-between space where love and passion are understood from a different viewpoint. It is in this space that Roy can offer her characters their freedom from all sorts of social, religious or traditional impositions. The author presents an alternative reality in which women are no longer dominated by men and can make their own decisions (however hazardous they may be). It is a space where transgression cannot have a meaning anymore since there are no rules to be disobeyed.

I believe that in designing what I called a Third Space of Love, Roy has tried to unravel the truth of human intimacy which cannot and must not be conditioned by any exterior *laws*. She compares the traditional couple (represented by the institution of marriage) and the “impossible couple” to use Julia Kristeva’s terminology (1987) with the purpose of revealing to the reader the essence of genuine feelings, of the *small things* that surround us. For Roy love becomes the nucleus around which she weaves the story of the characters. There is a similarity between this traditional Indian view of intimacy and that of the Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu, who in his work, *Despre limită (On Limit, 2004)*, constructs a theory of love that has much in common with that belonging to Arundhati Roy. In his book he discusses the concept of “limit” from a few different viewpoints including the perception of the one who loves. Here is the philosopher’s opinion on the origins and the position of a genuine feeling:

*An authentic emotion has no cause, no purpose, it is like a rare plant that grows unexpectedly from the barren land. An authentic feeling is also a true mystery. It lives in you. It is the center.*⁴ (Liiceanu, 2004: 136)

³ In coining this concept I reinterpreted Homi Bhabha’s notion of Third Space (1994). According to Bhabha there is an ambivalence of the act of communication which is thought to include both the general circumstances of the language and its performative and institutional implications. He relates this concept to Derrida’s *differance* and applies it to the specific features of the post-colonial literary manifestations emphasizing the hybridity of language.

⁴ My translation



Hybridity and androgyny

In this Third Space of Love, Arundhati Roy places the last and most controversial love couple, the one of the two dizygotic twins, Estha and Rahel. They are the key characters of the novel and the writer prefers them (at the age of nine) as the mirroring consciousnesses of events. I chose to include their relationship into a couple pattern because I believe that theirs is the only genuine manifestation of love which goes deeper than the selfishness of most human bonds in the novel. The Estha-Rahel couple is actually an illustration of Plato's androgyne myth which stands for an explanation of human passion and endless yearning for the loved one.

Estha and Rahel possess a double hybrid nature: one of origin and one of identity. In terms of original hybridity, the twins are half Hindu and half Syrian-Christian. They are condemned by society because they are the sign of both religious and social transgression. Nevertheless, what Roy emphasizes regarding the twins' hybrid nature is their identity hybridity. Estha and Rahel are two distinctive individuals, yet they share a single identity which is split into two. Roy offers many examples in the novel that support this theory but maybe the most illustrative of them is the following description of their "joint identities":

In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Estha and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities.

Now these years later, Rahel has a memory of waking up one night giggling at Estha's funny dream. (Roy, 1997: 2).

Neither Estha nor Rahel can function as individuals. One in the absence of the other is nothing but a hybrid; yet, together they become a "rare breed" of the human race, one that is complete and needs no alterations. They are still connected through an invisible umbilical cord that enables them to behave as one being instead of two.

I believe that the relationship between the twins Estha and Rahel represents by far the most evident example of absolute love in the book. What entitles me to situate

their relationship in the Third Space of Love is mostly the fact that they embody a rare unselfish emotional bond. No exterior law or rule can defend their relationship, yet they reach a level of togetherness similar to the mythical account of Plato's original androgynes.

The assumption that people were once a double being, androgynes, who were separated by the wrath of gods finds coherence when we discuss the constant search of human beings for their soul mates. Julius Evola comments that Plato's myth illustrates the achievement of unity through duality and this is exactly what happens between Roy's twins:

*In sexual love we acknowledge the most universal manner in which people are blindly trying to destroy duality, to existentially transgress the boundaries between Self and Other, between Me and You, flesh and sex serving as mere instruments of an ecstatic closeness to unification.*⁵ (Evola, 2002: 94-95)

This is the case of Estha and Rahel whose spiritual bond is best explained by the myth of the search of the androgyne's lost half. Neither time, nor distance could alter their indestructible union. When they finally meet again after being separated for twenty-three years their behaviours begin to adjust showing that they could be whole only together.

The arrival of his sister fights off the anesthesia of Estha's senses, while being near her brother forces Rahel to redefine her identity:

Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a woman. A twin a twin. (Roy, 1997: 93)

Slowly they acknowledge that their lost sense of orientation is found again and that they could reach once more the long desired state of wholeness from the time "of Beginnings and no Ends". The incestuous scene between the twins was much debated on but in the end this is no more than a search for identity. Through this event Arundhati Roy does not display sexuality and passion, but a painful attempt of the twins to reach the intrauterine state of oneness. Roy directs us towards such an interpretation when she affirms that Rahel was searching "her brother's nakedness for signs of herself" (Roy, 1997: 92). By merging physically, Estha

⁵ My translation



and Rahel attempt to complete each other and reestablish a lost spiritual connection, to rebuild the full image of their being by uniting the pieces of the puzzle dispersed inside them.

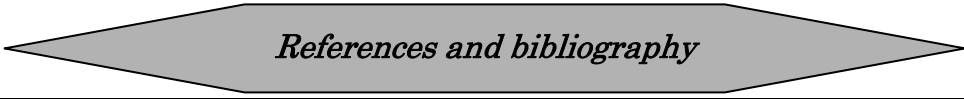
Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-colored shoulder had a semi-circle of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief. Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (Roy, 1997: 328)

This intimate encounter between the twins is not only a major offense of the *love laws*, but also the twins' only solution to recover the primordial unity which could beget a new reunited identity again. Rahel's gesture of initiating an intimate relationship is not to be conceived as blasphemous because she offers her brother the only thing he really needed: affection. Estha and Rahel's sexual unification is to be understood as an effort to reach the state of androgyny to which they were acquainted in their early childhood. They cannot function as individuals unless they are one "joint identity". Their physical union is meant to trigger a spiritual merger between two half-beings, "Quietness and Emptiness", with the purpose of re-creating a whole Self, a single identity, one soul shared by two bodies. What the twins do is just a desperate effort to regain psychic balance.

Understanding transgression

Best way to make sense of the actions of the "worst transgressors" of the book, Ammu and Velutha and Estha and Rahel, is to situate their actions in what I called a Third Space of Love. It is only in this area that the *love laws* lose their power and unthinkable acts are granted consistency. In the Third Space of Love both *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis* are reinterpreted. Ammu and Velutha do achieve spiritual freedom through sexuality, yet they disregard their caste affiliation. Rahel and Estha manage to re-create a pure unselfish bond, but only by infringing the boundaries set by Christian rules. In creating the impossible couples, Arundhati Roy does not lose her connection to reality and immediate social sanction

interferes. Nevertheless, what the writer's purpose seems to be is to create a new dimension of human emotions where no exterior regulations can apply: a Third Space of Love.



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Lucia-Mihaela Grosu currently teaches Business English and professional communication in the Academy of Economic Studies Bucharest. She has an MA in British Cultural Studies and is presently attending a second MA programme with the Academy of Economic Studies. Her main research interests include critical discourse analysis, visual studies and cross-cultural communication.

