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The God of Small Things and the question of identity

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Over the recent years, we have witnessed a proliferation of studies focusing on the concept of identity. We hear a great deal about identity at global, national, local and personal levels, be it a Serbian militia man's cigarette brand, Madonna's transformation from a female Marquis de Sade to a spiritual Mother Earth or the identity of a victim of the tyranny of slenderness that is being analysed. Yet, in these studies focusing on different 'natures' or 'spheres' of identity construction, two common and shared assumptions can be pointed out: first of all, identities as effects of socialising institutions are historically determined and therefore change through time, and any essentialist claims of a unified, clear or authentic identity are denied. Secondly, we construct ourselves through the exclusion of the others: identity is always a relational concept, and difference is established through symbolic marking in relation to others, whether the observation is based on the way ethnicity is represented, or gender, or class or nation.[1]

In the study of a cultural text or artefact, du Gay, Hall, et al. (1997) argue that in order to fully understand any cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to analyse the processes of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. These different moments of a circular process form a *cultural circuit*. The analysis can be started at any point since the circuit of culture is not a linear, sequential process. If this is so, why is it that the specific moment of identity construction has become the central concern in the recent studies? For instance, the word identity isn't even mentioned in Raymond Williams's authoritative – but ideologically very 70's, I would claim – glossary of the keywords on culture and society published in 1976.

Indeed, 'identity' and 'identity crisis' are terms and ideas much in current use in the cultural studies of the 90's and often seen as characterising contemporary societies. Identity – as Mercer writes – «only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.» (Mercer, 1990:4) It is the non-essentialist notion of identity I mentioned above that has become acute when now seen in the context

of the global transformations characterizing contemporary life, a phenomenon often designated as globalization, where changes in production and consumption patterns can be seen as producing new shared identities – often called Macdonaldized, global consumers, indistinguishable from one another. – Curiously enough, the March 7th *Sunday Times* literary supplement lead article presenting Germaine Greer's longawaited book *The Whole Woman* is entitled *Identity Crisis*. It seems that after a thirty year silence, Greer also has moved from *The Female Eunuch*'s celebration of Woman's bodily fluids into a post-feminist identity crisis.

Not suprisingly, this same fashionable rhetoric of otherness – the construction of identity in and through difference and alterity – is also at the heart of Arundhati Roy's 1997 book *The God of Small Things*. The story is set in the tiny river town of Ayemenen in Kerala, India. The major characters are Rahel and Estha, the fraternal twin daughter and son of a wealthy Christian Anglophone family. The family's prosperity is derived from a pickle factory and rubber estate, and their prideful Anglophilia distances them from their country's drift toward Communism and their 'inferiors' strive for social change. The twins' mother Ammu has left her violent alcoholic husband to live with her blind mother, her bitter, unmarried aunt Baby Kochamma and kind, if ineffectual communist brother Chacko. Chacko's ex-wife, an Englishwoman, has returned to Ayemenen, bringing along her and Chacko's daughter, Sophie Moll. The events of a crucial December day in 1969 – including an accidental death that may have been no accident (the twins may be responsible for Sophie Moll's death) and the violent consequences that affect an illicit couple, (high class Ammu and the 'Untouchable' Paria caste Velutha[2] who is murdered as a scapegoat for the Englishgirl's death) who have broken the 'Love Law' – form the narrative center around which the episodes of the novel repeatedly circle shifting back and forth in time, Rahel's point of view switching constantly from child's to adult's and back again.

Several ingredients for a reflection on identity are presented to the reader here. In the first place, we find the sphere of the construction of national and cultural identity, the British Empire *versus* an independent post-colonial India. The most striking feature here is the issue of political ideologies taken out of their European context, such as the importation of the Western binary constructions of the political left and right to the Indian caste society. Karl Marx himself, though critical of British Imperialism, thought that the British colonization of India was ultimately for the best because it brought India into the evolutionary narrative of Western history, thus creating the conditions for future class struggle there. Velutha, the untouchable paria, 'the god of small things' is seen by little Rahel to participate in a communist manifestation. This is denied by Rahel's mother (also Velutha's secret lover) Ammu so that Velutha wouldn't lose the position of certain confidence and prestige he has gained in this family.

Another expression of the British colonization is the protagonist family's Christian

religion, which in the novel stands for the ineffective and therefore only apparent Christianization of India: although English speaking Christians, the local native customs and beliefs continue to represent the true gods in people's lives, in the same way the native languages have not ceased to be the site in the construction of meanings that really matter. Significantly, the most affirmative anglophile of the narrative is the villain of the whole tragedy, aunt Baby Kochamma, a bitter loveless overeater, who once loved an Irish missionary without retribution. The culmination of Baby Kochamma's poor fate is that ironically the missionary ends up rejecting all earthly forms of love by becoming a monk.

It is Ammu's husband's alcoholism, a social and personal illness originating from the west, that has broken the twin's parents' marriage and caused Ammu and the twins' return to Ayemenem. And that ultimately leads to a battered wife's attempt to find self-esteem and identity through an impossible, forbidden love.

Besides the more general social constructions of identity based on the notions of ethnicity, nation and class, the sphere of the personal identity construction is also problematic. In *The God of Small Things*, the twins Estha and Rahel are separated as a punishment for Sophie Moll's death. Rahel stays home and attends unsuccessfully various girls' schools while Estha is sent to his father, and now twenty-three years later back to Ayemenem when his father decides to emigrate to Australia. Throughout the story, Rahel-narrator uses the pronouns *I* and *we* interchangeably when referring to herself/themselves and thus signals one single personal identity[3]. The long separation has practically destroyed Estha as a person – he hasn't said a word for years – and left permanent damage to Rahel. As if setting apart, splitting into two the one single 'egg' or identity wasn't enough, the two halves of the unity also belong to different genders, a fact that plays a crucial role in the narrative.

The above thematizations of the various dimensions of identity play a central role in the narrative line of the text. It is my thesis, however, that despite these multiple ways of dealing with the matters of identity, it is the question of sex that becomes the key to identity construction in *The God of Small Things*. Or: in Arundhati Roy's perspective, it is in sex that the truth of who and what we are is to be found more accurately than anywhere else.

And why sex? The answer is simple: the whole story line unfolds through sexual wrong-doings, that is, the characters fall in love with the forbidden people. To start with, Baby Kochamma's impossible passion is the Irish monk, a love that transforms her into an obese, mean tv-addict. Next, Ammu marries against her parent's will a man who turns out to be the wrong choice, a violent drunkard. The most central mistake is Ammu's sexual relationship with the Untouchable Velutha, 'The god of small things'. At the end of the novel, the twins Rahel and Estha sexually consume their unity by having an incestous sexual relationship. After having done it, we are told that «once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much.»[4] – The last chapter, a description of a love scene between

Ammu and Velutha, is enigmatically entitled *The cost of living*. In fact, the novel is about what the author decides to designate as 'breaking the laws of love'.[5]

Michel Foucault has a different name to Arundhati Roy's love laws. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault's theoretical concept to the same socio-cultural phenomenon is the *dispositif* of sexuality. *Dispositif* refers to the relations between, and totality of, a heterogeneous ensemble of elements, of which the most important are, discursive practices, institutions, scientific and medical techniques, and living out of stereotypes. The *dispositif* of sexuality stands only for those signifying practices that function in power relations.

Foucault traces the path through which individuals become, in the modern period, subjects whose ultimate truth is their sexuality. As he writes, «a certain inclination has lead us to direct the question of what we are, to sex.» (Foucault, 1978: 78) His aim is to expose the relation between knowledge and power in order to understand the place of sexuality in society[6]. According to Foucault, sexuality is a multiplicity of historically specific discourses, ways of mapping the body's surface, which dictate how we must describe and experience those bodies:

> Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.
>
> (Foucault, 1978:105-6)

In other words, sexuality is a form of social regulation, undoubtfully the most powerful one. We can talk back to and resist power, demanding our liberation from the professional classificatory discourses. But we always do so in the name of those same categories and through the same discourses it has given us: we can only resist from inside power, there is no escaping it. This is because, as I wrote earlier (see the footnote 6), power is everywhere, it runs through the social body as a whole. It is for this reason that Foucault bypassed most accounts of individual experience, such accounts being always already imbued with the discourses of power.

By becoming 'emancipated', breaking sexual taboos, and throwing off sexual prohibitions we believe ourselves to be gaining freedom, but instead, we become dominated by certain images which are in fact powerful instruments of control. Sexual nature is itself a product of those modes of knowledge designed to make us objects of control.

The God of Small Things is a sad book. It is sad because the author wanted it to be so. Because she also knows that the irony of the *dispositif* lies in «having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance.»[7]

Notes

[1] This same phenomenon of demarcation and exclusion actually takes place in any attempt to describe a cultural representation. According to Edward Said, culture is «a system of exclusions legislated from above but inacted throughout its polity, by which such things as anarchy, disorder, irrationality, inferiority, bad taste and immorality are identified, then deposited outside the culture and kept there by the power of the state and its institutions.» (Said, 1984:11)

[2] «Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan footprint. In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.» (pp. 73-4)

[3] «In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Esthappen 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. « (p. 2)

«'Promise me you'll always love each other,' she'd say (Ammu), as she drew her children to her. 'Promise,' Estha and Rahel would say. Not finding words with which to tell her that for them there was no *Each*, no Other.» (p. 225)

[4] As the whole passage goes: «There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings. ... But what was there to say?

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-coloured 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 they once again broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much.» (p. 328)

[5] There is still another 'love law' that is broken: the 8-year-old Estha is a victim of a sexual abuse by a pedophile Orangedink Lemondrink man in the cinema (the film in question is *The Sound of Music*).

[6] Instead of constructing a theory about power, Foucault aims for an analysis of power. Unlike many of his contemporaries (such as Althusser, Lacan, or Lévi-Strauss), he doesn't observe power through the concepts of law, prohibition, freedom and sovereignty. For Foucault, power is «not an institution, and not a structure: neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is a name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.» (Foucault, 1978:93) Power is «the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them» ... «Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.» (Foucault, 1978:92-93) In other words, Foucault is not interested who's got power, but in the processes by which subjects (or identities) are constructed as effects of power. –And most importantly for the present working purposes, the people of Modernity are not driven by the pressures of repressed sexuality but rather by a will to seek knowledge that has lead to *Scientia Sexualis*.

[7] Foucalt, 1978:159.

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