

Antonia Navarro-Tejero, 2005,
Gender and Caste in the Anglophone-Indian Novels of
Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan:
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I

Today, as Indian English writers like Vikram Seth (*Two Lives*) and Vikram Chandra (*Sacred Games*) receive remarkable advances on the book market for their latest creations, the study of Indian Writing in English (IWE) continues, in parallel, to progress in the Western academic world, conquering such bastions as Cambridge University. However, in the West as at 'home' in India, controversy continues to rage as to the authenticity of IWE practitioners vis-à-vis those who write in autochthonous languages, and, within IWE itself, of expatriate versus India-based authors. Antonia Navarro's volume appears as a contribution to debate focusing on the social-critical positions and literary merits of two living Indian women writers, concentrating on one novel by each, Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992).

The choice of two women writers of known radical tendencies immediately points to a feminist reading: the book's title, nonetheless, with its reference to 'gender and caste', makes it clear that the dimension of social hierarchy will also be taken into account. The two modes of social analysis are, in fact, explicitly linked, via the concept of Subaltern Studies as famously developed by Gayatri Spivak¹: in both Roy's and Hariharan's fictions, the explorations of women's issues and of caste oppression are seen as running in parallel, since if women are subalterns in Spivak's sense of a group on the wrong side of the hierarchical structures whose members lack an organised voice, so too are the members (of both genders) of the lower or 'backward' castes and, still more so, the Dalits (or Harijans, or former untouchables) who are traditionally considered to subsist outside the caste system altogether.

II

The two novelists exhibit both substantial similarities and clear differences. Both are India-resident, not diasporic, though both write exclusively in English (Roy's mother tongue is Malayalam, Hariharan's is Tamil). Both have South Indian roots (Roy, born in 1961 in Shillong, now in the eastern state of Meghalaya, was raised in Ayemenem, Kerala; Hariharan, born in 1954 in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, grew up in Bombay and Manila); both focus in their work, at least in the novels under discussion, on women's lives and family matters; and both would regard themselves as politically-oriented writers and as feminists. Culturally, Hariharan is from a Hindu background while Roy is of mixed Hindu/Christian extraction. One major difference is that, while *The God of Small Things* and *The Thousand Faces of Night* both have the status of first novels, Hariharan has gone on to maintain a balance between fiction and non-fiction, authoring numerous newspaper articles but also producing, to date, three more novels and two volumes of short stories; by contrast, Roy's best-seller is still her sole published work of fiction: in the wake

¹ See Antonia Navarro's own exposition of Spivak's ideas in 'Telling (Her)Story: An Overview of Subaltern Studies' (2004).

of its huge success, she has concentrated on journalistic and documentary non-fiction, bringing out several collections of essays in that vein but not so much as a single short story. In market terms, Hariharan's work is well known and respected within India, and more generally in the postcolonial studies milieu (*The Thousand Faces of Night* was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Novel, and has been translated into French, Spanish and Dutch), Nonetheless, Hariharan's name is likely to be less familiar than Roy's to the non-Indian general reader: *The God of Small Things* not only won its author the Booker Prize but has proved an authentic international best-seller, with massive sales in the English-speaking world and translations into over 20 languages.

Thus, many readers will know that *The God of Small Things*, set in Kerala, deals with the travails of a family from that state's long-established (and pre-British) Syrian-Christian community: the intimate bond between the twins Rahel and Estha, and the ill-fated, socially proscribed entanglement between Ammu, their divorced mother, with the carpenter Velutha, of Paravan (Dalit) origin but a Christian convert who, though a member of the powerful Kerala communist party, is betrayed by the party hierarchy and ends up beaten to death by the police. Roy's novel also takes in the issues of cross-cultural marriage (Ammu's brother Chacko briefly and disastrously marries an Englishwoman) and female conservatism (in the shape of Ammu's fiercely repressive, frustrated aunt Baby Kochamma). Hariharan's plot is structured around Devi, a young woman from a Tamil Nadu brahmin family who, after a brief taste of Western mores when studying in the US (where she has an African-American boyfriend), returns home to accept an arranged marriage, from which she later escapes into a (short-lived) affair with a travelling musician. The novel also narrates the lives of two other women, Devi's mother Sita, whose husband forced her to give up her great love and talent, playing the veena, and their dysfunctionally married family servant, Mayamma.

III

The study's starting-point is essentially sociological, though, clearly, not in a static or descriptive sense but activating a world-view which is essentially dynamic, evaluating things as they are in the hope and, indeed, expectation of their being changed. It is thus presupposed that literature can act as both a mirror of society and a stimulus to cultural transformation. However, since we are dealing with a European perspective on a subcontinental social reality, doubts immediately arise: the radically-minded Western (social and literary) critic, well-intentioned though it may be, risks being charged with a shallow and incomplete understanding of the phenomena denounced, if not of perpetuating 'Orientalism' or, indeed, downright neo-colonialism by reproducing stereotypes and clichés about 'eternal India', 'downtrodden Indian women', 'benighted customs', etc. It behoves Western critics to tread carefully and be very sure of their ground when dealing with caste and gender phenomena that are deeply rooted in Indian society.

Navarro's study is, in fact, extremely refreshing in this sense, for the author not only proves to be fully aware of the problems involved, but examines them, in gratifyingly convincing detail, through the prism of a carefully worked-out cultural synthesis. For Roy, while highlighting the gender dimension, she also follows what is by now a well-trodden path of sociological and political analysis, as exemplified by earlier critics such as Alessandra Contenti (2001) and Basuli Deb (2003)². The assumption is that the study of works such as Roy's and Hariharan's will help the reader, both Indian and non-Indian, to reach a better understanding of Indian social realities.

² Contenti and Deb both contextualise Roy's novel in relation to Christianity and communism in Kerala: Navarro's critical perspective on both systems in their interaction with class and caste issues tallies with the positions of these critics.

All in all and nonetheless, the specifically literary and formal aspects are not neglected. As Navarro sees it, 'these authors ... are not merely concerned in documenting reality, but ... have used their novels as a medium for ... a subtle projection of values, by suggesting re-assessment and re-definition' (3). Indeed, one of the strengths of her analysis is that it avoids reducing the texts to political tracts, succeeding, on the contrary, in showing how the two writers achieve their ideological impact through the manipulation and rewriting of specifically literary conventions and devices.

IV

The study commences with an overview of feminist criticism in India, stressing those perspectives which, as in the work of Chandra Mohanty, take a critical view of attempts by Western feminists to apply their ideas to Indian women with scant regard for cultural context. It is further noted that some Indian activists do not consider the term 'feminist' appropriate at all, preferring formulations such as 'women's concerns' (10). Navarro goes on to offer a survey of modern Indian women's writing from Toru Dutt (1856-1877) onwards, concentrating on literature in English, as a backdrop to a more detailed presentation of Roy, Hariharan and the two novels under discussion. In both fictions, she argues, what we find is a strong critique of patriarchal structures, which delineates 'the power structures' impact on the subaltern and the strategies offered to subvert the norms' (27): in other words, they both expose the patriarchal reality as it is and propose ways of going beyond it and constructing a new and more equal reality.

Navarro subjects both novels to a carefully contextualised social and political analysis, explaining how the fictional events reflect the interaction of caste and gender structures and the determining instance of the power apparatuses of state and religion. She shows how Hindu women's lives have been conditioned by the attitudes embodied in the *Laws of Manu* (dating from c. 1500 BCE), which place women's lives under the control of their close male relatives. Similar attitudes are seen as perpetuated by the classic texts of Hindu literature (or at least by the dominant readings of them), with figures like Sita (*Ramayana*) and Draupadi (*Mahabharata*) held up as exemplars of the passive, subservient wife: Navarro argues that 'the values embodied in these ideal figures loom large in the consciousness of women even when they reject these role models' (56). She does not, however, consider Christianity, at least in its Syrian-Keralan version, to be any better, stressing how Roy's novel 'takes on the hypocrisy of Syrian Christians towards caste issues' (79 - an issue on which they appear to act like honorary Brahmins) and arguing that, irrespective of creed, 'religion, based on the tradition of patriarchal control, represses women' (87).

Despite all this, the author is at pains to stress that the relation between (female or subaltern) individual and (male-dominated and Brahminical) society is not all one-way: there is fierce social conditioning, but there can be equally tenacious resistance against it. In the wider social context, the author rejects the claims certain forms of self-styled radicalism, as exemplified in trade unionism or communism, endorsing Roy's unsympathetic portrayal of Kerala communism (in Ammu's brother Chacko, a communist factory-owner but as exploitative as any other capitalist, and in the party boss who washes his hands of the card-carrying Dalit Velutha) as a discourse of false liberation that offers nothing to women or Dalits. Specifically on Indian women's lives, Navarro avoids falling into the trap of imposing Western models by stressing the endogenous nature of the female characters' resistance in the two novels, and, in particular, its relation to specifically Indian notions of motherhood:

Both Devi and Rahel are liberated women who know their traditional cultural roots, but are critical about them. Not only do they not submit to them, but they also make

individual decisions. So they are traditional as well as modern, breaking the stereotype of what it means to be Indian. However, their final stage is to seek redemption through the figure of the mother to remake their female identity. In this context, Indian women - perennially and transcendently wife, mother and homemaker - used to save the project of modernization-without-westernization. It is only the female subject who can be shown as successfully achieving the balance between (deep) tradition and (surface) modernity, through strategies of representation (47).

V

It is in the detailed analysis of those 'strategies of representation', as employed on the page by Roy and Hariharan, that the key merit of Navarro's project lies if we are to view it as literary criticism (rather than as sociology, which in principle it is not). To illustrate her theoretical readings, she resorts in particular to two literary-critical strategies: intertextuality and symbol analysis. The author shows how both Roy and Hariharan both evoke and rewrite figures and episodes from the Indian canon, bringing out their hidden potential for a more affirmative view of woman. Here and with regard to Hariharan, she echoes Joel Kuortti, who stated in 2001 that *'The Thousand Faces of Night* is very much about storytelling'³. In that novel, Devi imaginatively recasts the story of Amba from the *Mahabharata* - Amba, the woman who became a man in order to revenge herself on the Kaurava warrior Bhishma for spurning her. Navarro sees Devi's fascination with this story as embodying the 'combination of male power and female gentleness and sensitivity' (90). Similarly, she reads the moment near the end of *The God of Small Things* when the divorced Rahel manages to negotiate a difficult return to her home society with the episode in the *Ramayana* in which Sita, having been abducted and recaptured, has to pass through an ordeal by fire before she can return to her marital home (140). Complementarily, Navarro also examines key symbols in the two novels to show how the authors' ideological positions crystallise in literary form. She here explains how both Roy and Hariharan make similar use of two symbolic plot elements, namely gardens and music. In both novels, there is a female character - Baby Kochamma in Roy, Devi's mother Sita in Hariharan - who, at a moment in her life when she retreats into herself under the weight of oppression, devotes herself to tending a garden: for Navarro, in a patriarchal context 'the garden is a symbol for an identity dominated by external influences' (123-124). Conversely, music represents women's frustrated potential for autonomy and creativity. In *The God of Small Things*, Mammachi, the grandmother, is made to drop her violin lessons by her jealous husband; similarly, in *The Thousand Faces of Night* Devi's mother is forced to give up the veena. Thus, as Navarro stresses, it is a major moment of liberation - 'an indication that they are to free their roots and be true to their own selves' (130) - when, at the end of Hariharan's novel, Devi, returning home to re-encounter her mother woman-to-woman 'quickened her footsteps as she heard the faint sounds of a veena, hesitant and childlike, inviting her into the house'⁴.

VI

If the goal implied in both novels is the construction of an alternative model of Indian womanhood, not impermeable to Western influences but essentially home-grown, such a model needs concepts and images to concretise it: and here, Navarro concludes that Roy's and Hariharan's narratives enshrine *androgyny* as a symbol of and for the future. Androgynous symbolism is not lacking in the Indian tradition, as in the figure of Ardhanarineshwara (the fusion of Shiva and Parvati, one side male, one side female): in the texts under discussion, Navarro locates a comparable dynamic in the final coming-together of the twins Rahel and Estha in Roy, or in the rewritten myth of Amba in Hariharan. If pre-set roles are perceived as

³ Kuortti/Hariharan, 'The Double Burden' (interview, 2001), 17.

⁴ Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, 139.

oppressive to both genders ('a society [which] rigidly differentiates between male and female gender roles ... limits the full development of women and men alike' - 35), the way forward, Navarro believes, lies in the creation, in both literature and life, of 'an androgyny ideal, a utopian state where the accomplishment of desires is a positive step towards liberation from a dominant, androcentric, casteist ideology, rejecting the society that constructs gender and caste differences' (153).

Antonia Navarro's analyses and conclusions in this study come over as convincing, backed up as they are by a wealth of detail in the form of abundant contextual information and, most importantly, close textual analysis. Her plea for an 'Indian' model of emancipation, for women and for subalterns in general, is eloquently expressed and paves the way for an ultimate, syncretic resolution of cultural antinomies that might to some seem insuperable. Here and for the further development, theoretical and practical, of this line of research, the reviewer would suggest that the analysis traced out by Navarro could, eminently usefully, be pushed into a different domain, that of modern writing in Indian languages. In this connection, and presupposing LGBT studies as a subset of Subaltern Studies, one may helpfully refer to the work of Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai and to their anthology of 2000, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. This volume includes a whole series of revelatory texts narrating same-sex desire and union - by no means always pejoratively, and many of them being translated from Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, etc. In 'A Double Life', a short story written in 1979 in Rajasthani by Vijay Dan Dehta and employing the resources of folktale and dream symbolism, two women escape their village into a same-sex marriage, baring themselves to the lightning and entering a dream palace controlled by beneficent ghosts where, finally, 'the two fell into each other's arms and that is where they still are'⁵. The existence of material like this, in a lesser-known language like Rajasthani, strongly suggests that much work needs to be done, in India and the West, on the representation of subaltern roles and their transgression as well as on the creation of symbolic alternatives, in Indian writing in languages other than English. Meanwhile and as far as the better-trod paths of Indian Writing in English is concerned, Antonia Navarro's eloquent study adumbrates an eminently useful template for future literary and cultural analysis, in what remains a crucial area of gender and subaltern studies.

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⁵ Dehta, 'A Double Life', in Vanita and Kidwai (eds.), *Same-Sex Love in India*, 324.

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