

Postcolonial Fiction and the Question of Influence: Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* and Rumer Godden

Alex Tickell
Open University, UK

In an interview with *Salon* magazine conducted in September 1997, only a few months after the publication of her meteorically successful first novel, *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy was asked about her literary influences. Her response to the interviewer Reena Jana, quoted here, says more, perhaps, about the expectations of journalists and critics at the time, with their inevitable comparisons to Salman Rushdie, than it does about Roy's own precursors:

RJ: Speaking of influences ... your work has been compared to Salman Rushdie's.

AR: I think that the comparison to Salman has been just a lazy response. When in doubt, if it's an Indian writer, compare them to Salman, because he's the best-known Indian writer! ... I think critics have a problem when a new writer comes along, because they want to peg an identity on them ... Actually, it's not just Rushdie I'm compared to. There's [Garcia] Marquez, Joyce ... and Faulkner, always Faulkner. ... But I've never read Faulkner before! So I can't say anything about him. I have, however, read some other writers from the American South — Mark Twain, Harper S. Lee — and I think that perhaps there's an infusion or intrusion of landscape in their literature that might be similar to mine.

While Roy grudgingly accepts that she might share a comparable imaginative terrain—'an infusion ... of landscape'—with writers of the American South she avoids answering the (interview) question of her 'influences' directly: a question that is perhaps always difficult for writers, who may want to disavow sources of inspiration—especially if, like Roy, they place a high political and artistic value on integrity and creative independence. At the time, Roy's possible literary influences were also, to some extent, occluded in the marketing rhetoric that accompanied her debut: a discourse notable for its emphasis on her miraculous discovery as a full-fledged literary genius whose work had few precedents (Tickell, xiii).

The question of Roy's literary influences in *The God of Small Things* was also complicated by the novel's dense patchwork of literary allusions: to works by Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, which later enabled students and critics of Roy's

fiction to reflect in depth on the tactical postcolonial strategies employed in her writing and the reiterative, resistant citation of the English canon by an author who would in time become part of a canon of Indian English fiction herself. However, very few of her critics have looked beyond these overt intertextual reference points or considered other, less visible genealogies for Roy's writing. With the publication of her more digressive and stylistically fluid second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), a strong case could be made for finding a form of 'self-influencing' in the continuities between her non-fiction and fiction (see Lau and Mendes, 2) but, as noted above, these questions become more opaque and speculative when we think of *The God of Small Things*. This is especially the case if we look at possible colonial precursors for Roy's fiction: works such as Rumer Godden's late imperial middlebrow fictions set in India—*Black Narcissus* (1939), *The River* (1946), and an even later retrospective work, *The Peacock Spring* (1975).

As I will argue in the following pages, Godden's largely forgotten novellas bear more stylistic and formal resemblances to *The God of Small Things* than any of the other works routinely brought into parallel readings or identified as part of an associative textual field. In fact, I will suggest that established interpretative strategies, particularly in postcolonial studies, may 'read' fiction in a certain programmatic way that contributes to a selective blindness (or at the very least a particular 'way of seeing') when it comes to influence. Like the entranced protagonist of Ivan Andreyevich Krylov's Russian fable "The Inquisitive Man" (supposedly the origin of the idiom "the elephant in the room"), who visits a museum and is impressed by the numerous *small* things—"little bits of beetles!—some like emeralds, others like coral ... tiny cochineal insects!" (43)—but fails to see a large elephant among the exhibits, Roy's readers have perhaps ignored some wider unacknowledged presences in her work, like Godden's, in favour of a more immediate detailing.

This article reflects on these similarities through a close parallel examination of the three works by Godden cited above and Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Krylov's elephantine metaphor is justified here because I want to use the possibility of an unrecognized dialogue between Godden's and Roy's fictions to tackle the broader issue of "influence" as a critical-conceptual elephant in the room of postcolonial literary studies: something that can only be spoken of in certain ways, using a certain vocabulary, and which remains invisible, or at least hard to discern, in other instances. I am not interested in suggesting that Roy's work is derivative of Godden's—I think it is possible to appreciate the former's considerable technical accomplishments while still accepting some comparative inter-connection.

Instead, I will ask why certain critical assumptions—amongst them the politics of “writing back,” a kind of ironic formal auto-critique and a tendency to avoid “vertical” comparison between earlier and later texts in the post/colony except as a resistant form of reiterative citation—have made the question of “influence” a peculiarly difficult one to pose (and to answer) in postcolonial literary contexts.

A complicating factor in any detailed comparison of Godden’s and Roy’s fictions is the adaptation of Godden’s work into film: her first successful novel, *Black Narcissus*, was released as a film of the same name by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger in 1947, and *The River* was adapted for cinema by Jean Renoir in 1951 (a work now regarded as Renoir’s colour masterpiece). In a novel as attuned to cinema and visual effects as Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, it is possible that intertextual debts or influences might derive from the cinematic adaptations of Godden’s works rather than the texts themselves. Yet an overlapping of stylistic effects, figurative and perspectival devices, and tonal echoes in the work of both writers indicate that it is a literary rather than a literary-cinematic dialogue that should concern us in the first instance.

Reflections on Postcolonial Fiction and Influence

The striking formal similarities and shared motifs that occur in Roy’s and Godden’s writing prompt a review of the “question” of influence as it has been framed in literary and postcolonial critical studies before turning to our primary works.

Recalling Krylov’s unnoticed museum elephant we might remember another (deceased) elephant, in Roy’s novel, which appears as an incongruous fleeting image when the Ipe family drive home from the airport: “near Ettumanoor they passed a dead temple elephant, electrocuted by a high tension wire that had fallen on the road. An engineer from the Ettumanoor municipality was supervising the disposal of the carcass” (153). Noticed by the newly arrived Sophie Mol, the elephant is a piece of exotica that signals the text’s “Indianness” to receivers both within and without the novel, but it is also a minor fable itself, about human propensities to naturalize and procedurally fix the unexpected. The disposal of the elephant has to be undertaken carefully, writes Roy with mock-gravity, because “the decision would serve as precedent for all future Government Pachyderm Carcass Disposals” (ibid.). No less than municipal officials, literary critics tend to be conscious of precedents and once a literary elephant is disposed of in a

certain programmatic way, it is sometimes difficult to reassess the disposal process. While the troublesome elephant of Godden's formal and stylistic similarity to Roy as author of *The God of Small Things* can be approached in a number of ways, the dominance of a critical paradigm of intertextuality and its legacies (in which notions of authorial intention, originality, and creative debt have been replaced by, or enlarged into, a celebration of literary borrowing, reworking, and cross-fertilization) makes alternative ways of thinking about literary interconnection more difficult. Is it possible that authors like Godden and Roy can occupy the same archive, or share modes of conception or archetypal or stylistic formations, while espousing variant political and cultural positions? I will argue here that critical readings of postcolonial fiction might be richer if they registered a broader spectrum of these kinds of affiliations, and multiple modes of "influence". I should make it clear here that I use a comparative reading in order to locate Godden's and Roy's work in a literary-historical genealogy that admits the strong possibility of Roy's reading Godden's fiction, but there is no direct evidence of this prior awareness.¹

What might be termed traditional "influence studies" has, for a long time, been strongly associated with the hierarchical canon-forming values of the Great Tradition, and the institutional defence of high-cultural lineages against the incursions of popular- or multi-cultural forms (Clayton and Rothstein). A notable early essay by Ihab Hassan usefully problematised the naïve expressive connection of author and text in discussions of influence. With the far-reaching adoption of continental thought in the Anglo-American academy in the 1970s and 1980s, the elitist conception of influence was, as I have noted above, largely replaced by the more egalitarian concept-term "intertextuality," coined by Julia Kristeva and further theorized by Roland Barthes, in which the text becomes "a mosaic of quotations" and involves "the absorption and transformation" of other texts (Orr 21). This is not the place to give a full account of the critical and conceptual development of intertextuality, which has been surveyed fully elsewhere,² except to emphasize how a deconstructive turn in English literary studies radically changed the terms of what influence meant, privileging the *influenced* rather than the *influencer*, so that it no longer connoted belatedness or imitation but rather became an enabling condition of the text in its inevitable re-versioning of other texts and discourses.

The growing currency of intertextuality as the new meta-language of influence did not go completely unchallenged and, in the emerging fields of feminist and then postcolonial criticism, the relativism of the

intertextual model and its apparent loss of an intending authorial subject were both interrogated. In each case, very broadly, the issue of how to articulate an authentic self in the face of linguistic and literary constructions of femininity and/or “racial” difference led to a new interest in forms of subversive, double-voiced, or hybrid articulation, and a consequent focus on tactical modes of re-writing in which the potential for self-expression involved a less benign or *laissez-faire* intertextuality. In postcolonial Anglophone fiction the idea of intertextual “quotation” could not be discussed in any neutral way because of the instrumental place of the English literary text and the canon in a soft power of empire, which, as Roy’s novel shows so emphatically, manifested itself in educational and social institutions that systematically marginalized the culture and experience of the colonized, locking them out of history (Roy, 53)

What we find, then, in some of the earliest critical texts of postcolonial studies, written in the phase of its disciplinary consolidation, is not really a free play of quotations and interacting texts, but a model of inscription and re-inscription bounded by a particular political history. These accounts included the reactive dynamic of Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) and the subtler continuities and discontinuities mapped by Elleke Boehmer’s *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995). The influential model proposed in the former work, particularly, was for a configuration of centre and periphery in which postcolonial writers started, through reiterative and “abrogative” approaches, to reassert difference. One of the key creative strategies of postcolonial writing, these commentators maintained, was to inhabit and repurpose the “master” forms of canonical colonial fiction. For postcolonial women writers working within the historical shadow of a double effacement (in which they were marginalized on the bases of gender and ethnicity), the politics of intertextuality and agency was even more at issue.

As postcolonial and feminist critics revisited the issue of creative re-interpretation, they were also quick to note the patriarchal, ethnocentric nature of earlier models of influence such as Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), which featured the male author locked in Oedipal struggle with canonical precursors, and they argued for the viability of alternative forms of cultural production based on improvisation, collaboration, and performativity. Where postcolonial authors have “written back” directly to a particular canonical work, the critical tenor of this act is often far more creative and hopeful than Bloom’s idea of influence implies. Postcolonial writing shows that influence is not always negatively mimetic. Intrinsic to this intertextual impulse is its restitutive

intent—which often identifies a lack rather than a stifling authority in the precursor work—so that, in instances where cross-referencing occurs between canonical and postcolonial authors, its characteristic expression has been a deliberate, highly political revisiting and repositioning of perspectives and assumptions in which a canonical precursor text is re-inhabited—as in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) or J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986)—so that its lacunae are revealed and its silenced characters given a voice.

More recently, critical interrogations of forms of colonial historicism and an awareness of global experience of phenomena such as modernism have led to a move away from centre-periphery “writing back” models to more lateral, plural accounts of influence. In this approach, historically theorized by Elleke Boehmer and elaborated by Amit Chaudhuri and Simon Gikandi,³ the experience of global modernity and thus the direction of lines of modernist influence are configured across multiple centres and cannot be reduced to a one-to-one dynamic of inscription and re-inscription.⁴ Instead, textual similarity is located as a common, intersecting lateral effect: a shifting networked response to a modernist narrative template and formal innovations. An example of how Roy’s *The God of Small Things* might fit into this comparative framework is presented by Susan Stanford Friedman in her parallel reading of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Roy’s first novel, in which she proposes a non-binary, non-sequential, “spatialized” approach: *cultural parataxis*. For Friedman, the latter involves a psychoanalytically inflected method of “examining colonial and postcolonial forms of modernism in juxtaposition, not from the premise of western Metropole as centre and the colonized as periphery [but concentrating instead on ...] the reciprocal influences ... that result from transnational cultural traffic and intercultural contact zones” (246). Friedman argues that both Forster’s and Roy’s texts involve interventions against comparably oppressive structures of “race,” caste, and gender, but her analysis struggles to justify a comparative affiliation, rather than a simple parallelism, between both works.

A last detail of the possible affiliations between Godden and Roy must be considered: the argument made by critics like Timothy Brennan and Graham Huggan, and more recently by Lisa Lau,⁵ that so-called cosmopolitan literature not only dramatizes the contexts of its production but also anticipates the circumstances of its consumption—including forms of translation (see Walkowitz). On these terms, forms of pastiche and citation often signal a self-exoticizing awareness of the expectations of a global readership—and become, simply, a way in which difference

enters and is brokered in a global literary marketplace. Yet it is difficult to make a case for this kind of self-orientalizing recycling in Roy's potential affiliation with Godden when potential referents appear not as overt signposts but as stylistic watermarks on the pages of *The God of Small Things*. In the next section therefore, I will focus on a few key areas including elements of perspective, style, and the romance form, to show how such overlapping features might augment, complicate, and enrich our sense of the postcolonial literary negotiation of a (colonial) past.

Rumer Godden and Arundhati Roy: Perspectives and Stylistic Echoes

Rumer Godden was one of the most prolific writers of late colonial India but while her fiction, particularly her writing for children, reached a mass market, she has remained marginal to canonical literary history. Born in 1907, Godden spent her childhood in East Bengal, where her father was a shipping agent in the riverside town of Narayanganj. Rumer and her sister Jon were sent back to Britain in 1914 to be schooled but escaped the lengthy separation from their families that many colonial children endured because, with the outbreak of war, their parents decided it was safer to educate them at home in India (Chisholm 9). Apart from a few years in Britain in the early 1920s and time training in London as a dance teacher, Godden spent all her early adulthood in India, first in Calcutta, where she was married and ran a dancing school, and then in Darjeeling and Kashmir. Later, as a writer and single mother, Godden established a literary career against considerable odds, balancing the conflicting demands of maternity and literary creativity (Choroba).

Driven by her commitment as a professional writer, Godden managed to publish seventy works, including novels, autobiographies, journalism, children's stories, and books of poetry and short fiction. Yet her writing is not easily contained by generic markers and, like the motif of blurred boundaries in *The God of Small Things* (8–10), her fiction rarely follows prescribed rules: Godden's books often feature children but have uncompromisingly adult themes; they are colonial but exhibit little of the confidence of a masculine imperialist tradition; they employ modernist techniques but have middlebrow appeal. Perhaps because of her Indian childhood in the non-official social ranks of the Raj, Godden also returns repeatedly in her writing to outsider figures and mixed-race characters. Moreover, while she resisted any categorization of her writing as feminist, her fiction engages with issues of women's agency, creativity, and

fulfilment. In the wake of growing critical attention to middlebrow fiction and intermodernist writing, her work has garnered renewed scholarly interest (Lassner; Le-Guilcher and Lassner)—a process of reassessment that was long overdue.

As I have suggested above, a shared metaphorical economy and certain resonances and reflections from other of Godden's works (particularly *Black Narcissus* and *The Peacock Spring*) can be traced in *The God of Small Things*, but connections between Godden's fiction and Roy's novel are most striking in the former's autobiographical novella *The River*, one of the last significant fictions of colonial India. In *The River* Godden draws on her Narayanganj childhood (Godden, *Two*), to explore a favoured theme: coming of age. The critic Nilanjana Roy notes rightly that both Godden and Roy are rare examples of authors who have captured the experience of childhood in India convincingly, and Godden's focus here is the imaginative, poetry-writing Harriet, the second eldest child of four siblings, who is poised on the cusp of adulthood: between the imaginative childhood world inhabited by her younger brother, Bogey, and the promise of adult relationships represented by her attractive elder sister, Bea, and her friendship with a disabled war veteran, Captain John.

With its strikingly similar evocation of childhood in a large family home beside an Indian river, Roy's *The God of Small Things* reprises key details of perspective and setting. Both novels evoke a spirit of place in which rivers lend a profundity to the lives of children who grow up beside them. Both settings combine the pastoral and the industrial in unexpected ways too. In *The River*, Harriet's father manages a jute pressing works and their family house is the centre of a busy colonial industrial complex sustained by interminable insectile labour: "The children lived in the Big House of the Works. . . . There were thousands of coolies in the Works, though they were as impersonal as ants to the children" (10–11). A common industry in colonial Bengal, the processing of jute fibre for sackcloth (and military sandbags) hints at the threaded lives that break in the course of *The River*. In Roy's novel, the comparable industry is the Ipe family's pickle factory, where the "preserve" is a metaphor for cultural commodification and a creative, memorizing act—a motif copyrighted by Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*. In both works a hierarchical, structured domestic setting is connected by capitalist production to far-reaching commercial networks that link locality with a wider world. In fact, both *The River* and *The God of Small Things* use a remembered family home as an enchanted fictional site of childhood and both conform to Lynne Rosenthal's description of Godden's writing as "childhood . . . seen as a brief interlude invaded by early glimpses of mortality and betrayal" (27).

Roy's potential dialogue with Godden comes to the fore again in the stylistic similarities of *The River* and *The God of Small Things*, which include a common focus on sharp, telling details, combined with a portentous symbolism. Moreover, both works pivot around what Tessa Hadley aptly calls the "shock of juxtaposition" concealed inside the plot: "the charm of things, to which the writing is always susceptible, close up against horror" and "violence buttoned up inside learned forms of good behaviour" (Le-Guilcher and Lassner, 149–150). Alongside these jolting juxtapositions, and their ability to unsettle, the idiosyncratic, playful experimentation with language in Roy's writing as a way of evoking childhood—language as something to be manipulated and words used as playthings—is anticipated in a similarly playful, child-centred response to language in *The River*. Both works inherit a modernist preoccupation with interiority, and dwell on the caesurae between things thought and said; both also modify the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman*, stopping short of the *telos* we might expect in both forms, and involving, instead, a kind of temporal hesitancy, recapturing the experience of childhood on the reluctant threshold of the adult world.

In the bounded childhood worlds of both *The River* and *The God of Small Things*, tragedy intervenes in the accidental death of a European or "mixed-race" child: in each case it is a death that could have been prevented by the greater vigilance or care of another child, which thus marks the survivors with an indelible guilt. In Roy's novel it is Sophie Mol, Estha and Rahel's cousin (who visits Kerala with her British mother, Margaret Kochamma, their uncle's ex-wife) who dies. She is persuaded by the children to go on a river expedition in a small boat that Estha and Rahel have found and renovated, but the boat capsizes, and Sophie Mol is swept away and drowned, only to be recovered from the river later, "wrinkled as a dhobi's thumb" with "green weed and river grime woven into her beautiful redbrown hair" (251). In Godden's novel, the untimely childhood death is that of Bogey, Harriet's brother, who is bitten by a cobra while playing alone in the garden and whom Harriet finds lifeless in a bamboo grove. Bogey's loss is the tragic centrepiece of *The River* and, as noted earlier, the shock of his sudden solitary death and its juxtaposition with the fragile, sealed-in restraint of his bereaved parents work as a grim refusal of any potential sentimentalism in Godden's child-centred narrative.

In a study of the European child in *The God of Small Things*, Lucy Hopkins argues that Sophie Mol figures the normative discursive dominance of "whiteness," and therefore marginalizes Estha and Rahel who become, effectively, her non-European "Others." However, Hopkins

also notes that, while being positioned as a pure signifier within the world of the text, “Sophie Mol herself foregrounds her hybridity when she repeats the racist classification of them within the sphere from which she emerges. She tells Estha and Rahel: ‘You’re both whole wogs and I’m a half one’ (Roy, 16) ... and ... this double inscription of the white child as both hybrid and racist works to problematise the positioning of Sophie Mol as the ideal, white child” (285). The child-characters of *The River* are similarly marginally positioned, as European children who *remain* in India. Like Sophie Mol, they are the uneasy inheritors of an imperialist discourse that threatens to proscribe their own distinctive hybridizing experience of India in all its rich and unruly complexity.

In both Bogey’s and Sophie Mol’s deaths, India itself, embodied in its mythically encoded natural world (the snake and the river respectively), takes revenge on the European child. In each case too, the invulnerability of European children in canonical English children’s fiction is countermanded, so that Bogey’s death in *The River* plays out the terrible fate of the colonial boy-child *unprotected* by Rudyard Kipling’s Rikki Tikki Tavi against the cobra in the garden. With his solipsism and preference for “n’insects” over his tin soldiers (which he symbolically buries), Bogey thus develops as an enigmatic counterpart to the militarized adventuring children of high imperialism.⁶ Similarly, Sophie Mol’s death in the boating accident mocks the buoyant assuredness of the sailing child characters of Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* books: narratives that rehearse Britain’s maritime global dominance, and feature children who are not “duffers ... and won’t drown” (2). Hence, although superficially separable under colonial and postcolonial literary rubrics, both *The River* and *The God of Small Things* share a subversive impulse to remake or re-inflect the canonical English literary presentation of childhood.

These replications in the setting, plot development, and characterization of Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Godden’s *The River* might not amount to very much, were it not for their stylistic similarities. In each, a childhood encounter with language is conveyed through disjunction, forms of narrative enjambment, the use of ellipses, italics, en-dashes, non-standard capitalization, comical lexical reversals, word games, and *non sequiturs* to represent childhood dialogue and thought patterns. Thus, early in the narrative of *The River* Harriet asks her nanny why she and her sister are so dissimilar in their responses to the world, an exchange that leads to a meandering interior monologue:

Harriet sighed ...
“Nan, why is Bea so different?”

“She always was,” said Nan.
 “No, she is changing”
 “She is growing up” said Nan. “We all have to, willy-nilly”. Harriet did not much like the sound of that expression “willy-nilly”.
 “Oh, well!” She said, and sighed again and her mind went off on a rapid Harriet canter of its own, too rapid for stops. Will-I-get-hookworm-you get all-kinds-of worms-in-India-and-diseases-too-there-is-a-leper-in-the-bazaar-no-nose-and-his-fingers-dropping-off him-if-I-had-no-fingers-I couldn’t learn-music-could-I. (3)

And in the “Abhilash Talkies” chapter of *The God of Small Things*, in which the Ipe children watch *The Sound of Music*, Estha—who has just been traumatized by a sexually abusive encounter with the cinema drinks-seller—thinks about the film he is watching in a similar freeform interior monologue, and with similar concerns about contamination:

And there was Captain von Clapp-Trapp. Christopher Plummer. Arrogant. Hardhearted. With a mouth like a slit. And a steelshrill police whistle. A captain with seven children. Clean children. Like a packet of peppermints. He pretended not to love them but he did. He loved them. He loved her (Julie Andrews) ... They all loved each other. They were clean white children, and their beds were soft with Ei. Der. Downs. (105)

In both novels too, these idiosyncratic tumbling forms of interior narrative are complemented by a fascination with language as a manipulated written text. In Godden’s *The River* Harriet is clearly an authorial surrogate, and her burgeoning literary ability turns the novel into a minor-form *Künstlerroman*. Harriet’s poetry and stories are excerpted as pieces in the main narrative—thus, as she grows into her identity (as adult and author), Harriet tries out her writing on her increasingly distant older sister:

“I am not a painting person” said Harriet. “I am a writer” ... she wrote a book, at least the beginnings of a book ... then she showed it to Bea, who had not any great desire to look at it. *And they had four children*, read the reluctant Bea, *called Olive, Bice, Emerald and Spinach, all as green as grass and slimy*.
 “Queer children” commented Bea.
 “This is a book about frogs” said Harriet huffily.
 “Well, you should say so.”
 “You are supposed to understand that from reading the book”.
 “Well, I didn’t” said Bea.
 It was no good. This was a thoroughly tiresome time, and Harriet could not do anything with it. (50)

These textual effects do not recur in Roy’s novel as an expression of nascent authorship, but instead we encounter a similarly creative, excerpted involvement with the composition of written narrative, and its recitation as part of schooling (something that also occurs in *The River* in the children’s learning of Latin declensions and conjugations). In Roy’s case this is a way of compounding the theme of memory in the motif of

the recovered school notebook that the adult Rahel finds and retrieves from the family bookcase, in an echo of Harriet's concealment and retrieval of her own notebooks in Godden's work:

Laughter curled around the edges of Rahel's voice. "Safety First" she announced ...

"When we walk on the road into town," Cautious Estha's story went, *"we should always walk on the pavement. If you go on the pavement there is no traffic to cause accidnts [sic], but on the main road there is so much dangerouse [sic] traffic that they can easily knock you down and make you senseless or a criple [sic]."* (157, emphasis in original)

This scene reveals another close stylistic echo between Godden's and Roy's writing: the fascination of both authors with the quiddity and symbolic resonance of "things," especially the small, often unimportant things that are the props and talismans of childhood. In Roy's fiction, small things are given a political significance because of their disproportionality and gather power as found objects, whereas for Godden the symbolic force of things is the more important quality. This stylistic tendency to magnify small things is a distinctive part of Godden's fiction for children, and critics have remarked on how she was always "fascinated by the miniature." In her children's books "characters are frequently small (for example, dolls, mice); strong plots are condensed into small books; her vocabulary is minimalist, filtered for maximum impact" (Sebag-Montefiore, 150–151). Conforming to this focus on miniaturization in *The River*, the children's nanny forges tiny keepsakes and charms out of molten lead, and one of these takes on an almost occult, fairy-tale power as the signifier of Bogey's impending death. After Bogey's death, his tin soldiers, which are found later in the garden by his mother, have an almost unbearable mute associative force.

As its title suggests, Roy's novel is even more heavily invested in the resonance of small things, as holders of memory and talismans but also as things that counteract, symbolically, the "big things" of historically sanctioned oppressive systems such as institutional religious belief, nationalism, and caste. Thus, when the police track down and beat Velutha in the ruined "Heart of Darkness" house after news of his affair with Ammu has been reported (as a rape), they encounter incongruous scattered fragments of children's play: "ballpoint pens with London's streets in them ... Yellow-rimmed red plastic sunglasses" (311) which cheerfully contradict their suspicions, and which have to be hidden to justify police brutality. Like Bogey's tin soldiers, these tiny quotidian objects change after the event: their symbolic capacity alters, and they become weighted or freighted with a new significance, like the detritus of a much larger, public catastrophe.

The Forbidden Romance: Postcolonial Variations

It can be argued that the similarities between *The God of Small Things* and *The River*, proposed above, extend into a branching tracery of connections between Roy's first fiction and some of Rumer Godden's other works. Among these cross-hatching correlations, the motif of the forbidden, socially transgressive love affair stands out, and while *The River* is partly an impressionistic rendering of adolescent responses to adult love (in Harriet and Bea's competition for Captain John's attentions), other Godden novels, such as *Black Narcissus* and *The Peacock Spring*, explore risky, socially proscribed romantic relationships more fully: the first in relation to religious institutional injunctions against romantic love and physical desire, the second in the (colonial) taboo of inter-racial relations. In *The God of Small Things* Ammu and Velutha's romance updates the device so that caste rather than race becomes the boundary to be transgressed.

Forbidden love is a staple variant of the romance in numerous global literary traditions, and Godden's and Roy's works draw on popular European and Indian conventions in their romance themes. In *The God of Small Things* the topoi of the forbidden romance (also analysed by Lau and Mendes in relation to Roy's more recent fiction) follows the biblical theme of sinful desire, which is entirely in keeping with its Syrian-Christian contexts (Bose). It also allows for internal echoes within the text, so that the central plotline of Ammu's secret affair with the "untouchable" Velutha resonates with the earlier romantic disappointments of the children's "baby" aunt who falls in love with a young Irish Jesuit priest, Father Mulligan. Baby Kochamma's infatuation leads her to convert to Catholicism and enter a convent in Madras so that she can be near the object of her affections, but her devotion is never reciprocated, and she soon finds that the senior sisters monopolize the priests with more legitimate theological demands. As her hopes of romance with Father Mulligan diminish, Baby Kochamma develops nervous psychosomatic ailments and eventually returns to the family home in Ayemenem to embrace the embittered fate of a "wretched Man-less woman" (45).

As an unhappy ex-novice, it is appropriate that Baby Kochamma accompanies Ammu, Estha, and Rahel to a screening of *The Sound of Music* at a local cinema because Julie Andrews plays a similar part in the film as the "problematic" Maria, a novice who must leave a Salzburg convent because of her incompatibility with holy orders. As we have seen,

for the Ipe children, Estha and Rahel, the film is fascinating in its projection of ethnocentric mores of whiteness, but it also affords them a level of identification with the Von Trapp children and the possibility of imagining a loving two-parent family (which they themselves wish for) in place of Captain Von Trapp's tight-lipped authoritarian patriarchy. In this sense the "completed" family promised by Maria's arrival at the Von Trapps' mansion operates in the same way as Sophie Mol's whiteness: standing in as a "universal" ideal.

Yet even with these comparisons, *The Sound of Music* still seems an enigmatic intertext, and one that is slightly at odds with the postcolonial politics of Roy's novel. However, placed in close juxtaposition with Rumer Godden's writing, and compared with a novel like *Black Narcissus*, the filmic resonances of *The Sound of Music* become more interesting. Sharing both a monastic theme and a brooding mountain setting with the later, more saccharine Robert Wise musical, Godden's *Black Narcissus* tells the story of an order of nuns who try to set up a convent school in the Himalayan mountain state of Mopu, near Darjeeling. In this remote place, the only representative of empire is the unpredictable and dissolute Mr Dean, whose cynicism does little to help the sisters as they try to impose their own beliefs on the local community. In doing so they betray their own inflexibility and lack of understanding, and *Black Narcissus* thus allegorizes the tenuousness and the questionable justification for continued British colonial rule in the declining years of empire (Lassner 75).

Triangulated⁷ against *The God of Small Things* and its cinematic 1960s counterpart-text, resonances between *Black Narcissus* and *The God of Small Things* start to become apparent, not as exact similarities but as a shared metaphorical economy: in each, the religious community becomes aligned with wider colonial (or neo-colonial) historical forces; in each, the idea of feminist self-fulfilment through romantic love is presented as a risky wager against the "containing" quasi-legal order of the institution. There is no evidence to suggest that *Black Narcissus* informs Roy's novel, via its cinematic references, but the common tone of suppressed desire, which gives women in both works an "Unsafe Edge"(44, 321) and a potential for self-destructively challenging the symbolic order, makes Godden's first successful novel and its cinematic adaptation seem like an understudy for the more postmodern filmic reference-point of *The Sound of Music* in Roy's. As backgrounds to romance in each case, religious communities of women (communities that increasingly fascinated Godden) hint at other themes, noted by Philip Tew, that apply as much to Roy's novel as to Godden's writing, including "the complexity of different

kinds of longing, a desire for belonging, for various kinds of intimacy” (Le-Guilcher and Lassner, 136).

The wider metaphorical economy shared by *The God of Small Things* and *Black Narcissus* is replaced by a closer set of correlations in Godden’s later work, *The Peacock Spring* (1975). Here the device of the transgressive romance drives the plot much more centrally in the story of Hal and Una, the adolescent daughters of a British diplomat, Sir Edward Gwithiam, who are removed from their British boarding school and taken to live with their father after he accepts a UN posting in New Delhi. The lonely and frustrated elder daughter, Una, falls in love with the Indian under-gardener, Ravi, who has found employment in the grounds of Sir Edward’s extensive diplomatic residence in order to conceal himself from the police after becoming involved in radical politics as a student. Their romance has a counterpart in the fraught relationship of the girls’ mixed-race governess, Alix Lamont, with their father. Una and Ravi try to elope after Una becomes pregnant, but their relationship is presented as too immature and ultimately too incompatible to be sustained and, after miscarrying her child, Una returns home to Britain.

As a novel about India in the mid-1970s, the turbulent era of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, *The Peacock Spring* is strangely anachronistic because it draws on Godden’s experience of India half a century before and, with its imagined world confined largely to a diplomatic and governmental elite, barely registers the tremors of contemporary postcolonial history. Indeed, even though radicalism is figured in the character of the impulsive, poetic Ravi, the latter’s political inclinations are kept deliberately vague and he is described as being part of a group called the “Prajā Swaraj,” a “movement against the establishment” (217). As Elizabeth Maslen has noted, the racial politics of *The Peacock Spring* shows a certain subtlety when it updates colonial attitudes personified by Edward Gwithiam (who must reconcile himself to his own diminished authority), and freely allows specific characters to betray their own prejudices (quoted in Le-Guilcher and Lassner, 73). However, the novel then disappointingly reverts to the same colonial racial pathologies by implying that Alix’s manipulative sexuality, deceptiveness, and dishonesty are symptomatic of her Anglo-Indian racial makeup.

The cross-racial relationship, and its cognitive impossibility, is one of the most durable devices of colonial fiction, and by the mid-1970s postcolonial authors were already revisiting and interrogating it in works like Ruth Praver Jhabvala’s *Heat and Dust* (1975), which explores cross-cultural desire and (Euro-American) feminist self-realization rather more successfully. Jhabvala’s development of tropes from Forster’s *A Passage*

to India (1924) in the doubled time-scheme of her novel reminds us of the way Forster updated the motif of the cross-racial assignation himself. Godden clearly works in this tradition, and was influenced by Forster, but gestures towards other middlebrow staples of colonial romance fiction in the archetypal character of Vikram, a dashing prince and son of the fallen Maharaja of Paralampur (50–51), and rehearses even older forms of the colonial “Mutiny romance” in Una and Ravi’s short-lived elopement during which Una disguises herself as a Rajasthani woman.

Roy, in adapting a reflexive colonial attention to racial purity and hybridity in the device of the transgressive, socially forbidden romance—reconfigured around a historically entrenched paranoia about cross-caste relationships—reveals how much she builds (more or less consciously) on earlier traditions of the Anglophone Indian novel in *The God of Small Things*, an inheritance that has led some critics, such as Susan Stanford Friedman mentioned earlier, to suggest that Roy’s work can be read productively alongside Forster’s *A Passage to India*. However, as I have emphasized throughout this article, Godden’s writing offers, arguably, a more pervasive set of influences for Roy: debts which extend beyond the repurposing of plot and character to perspective, stylistic technique and forms of metaphorical association, and an indexing of tone and setting.

In *The Peacock Spring*, it is Una’s frustration at domestic confinement and the inadequate homeschooling conducted by her father’s new love-interest, Alix, that precipitates her retreat into the garden. The biblical connotation of the garden with forbidden knowledge is reinforced in Una’s initial relationship with Ravi and his medical student friend, Hem, to whom she turns for help with her mathematics studies. Like Roy’s later portrayal of the divorced and unhappily “returned” Ammu, the implicit feminist thematic of *The Peacock Spring* is the wasting of the potential and energy of a young woman in a kind of domestic stasis. Una’s English school-teachers recognize her mathematical ability, and anticipate university study, but her educational ambitions founder in India. Similarly, Ammu’s frustrations as a single mother involve a sense that she is locked out of any further possibility for change or growth: the “cold feeling on a hot afternoon that Life had been Lived” (222).

In both illicit romances the garden becomes the site of a desire, with the male body as its scopophilic object: Una at first spies on Ravi, whose body, lit by an oil lamp as he writes poetry in his room, is luminous and graceful (42). In Roy’s novel, Ammu catches sight of Velutha in a similar moment of libidinal realization: “In the dappled sunlight filtering through the dark green trees, Ammu watched Velutha lift her daughter effortlessly ... she wondered at how his body had changed – so quietly,

from a flat muscled boy's body into a man's body" (175). In Godden's work, the deliberately ambiguous references to Ravi's political involvements hint at a left-wing revolutionary cause, and later in the novel it is suggested that he and his friend Hem have been involved in a factory "incident" in which his group "incited the workers to riot," and in which a foreman was blinded in an acid attack (218). Apart from the intriguing figurative connection between Ravi as the object of the gaze and his violent refusal of the gaze in his suspected involvement in the factory incident, the publication date of *The Peacock Spring* indicates that Godden may have modelled Ravi's student radicalism on the Naxalite uprising of the late 1960s. Significantly, Velutha in *The God of Small Things* also occupies the role of a suspected Naxalite sympathizer, and thus in both texts the transgressive nature of the romance theme parallels a wider call for revolutionary change.

This brief comparative survey may not *categorically* prove any textual associations between Godden's novels and Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Roy's possible reading of, and familiarity with, Godden's fiction will have to be verified or disproved by future archival work. What it does propose is that complex postcolonial novels such as Roy's may well operate on multiple intertextual levels with their colonial precursors, involving layers of reiterative citation, forms of playful cosmopolitan textual "re-orientalism," (Lau and Mendes, 4) and deeper, less overtly or easily acknowledged stylistic interactions. It also reveals that while we have been accustomed to reading colonial fictions (and many canonical fictions) with a parallel attention to their often jarring combinations of aesthetic value and imperial political investments, it has been more difficult to envisage postcolonial novels as both the recipients of and responders to localized Anglophone traditions, or as positively informed by colonial works. Even as they occupy very different cultural, historical, and biographical positions, Godden and Roy are "critical insiders" (Lassner's term), with keen shared sensitivities to structures of authority and social expectation, and both writers defamiliarize these power structures through a forensic attention to the experience of childhood. As women "writing India" through a repurposed Anglophone novel form, and through a common engagement with aspects of modernism, perhaps it is not so strange that Godden's writing is echoed in Roy's fiction.

Notes

1. I am grateful to M. Murugan, the librarian of The Lawrence School at Lovedale, Tamil Nadu, Arundhati Roy's *alma mater*, for checking holdings of Rumer Godden's works in the school's library catalogue. The library has copies of eight of Godden's works, including *The River* and *Two under the Indian Sun*, and although there is no evidence that Roy read any of these, their presence shows that during her time at The Lawrence School Roy would have had ready access to Godden's fiction.

2. See Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Polity, 2003) and Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (Routledge, 2000).

3. For a mapping of cross-nationalist influence and textual dialogue, see Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (Oxford UP, 2002), and *Indian Arrivals 1870–1915: Networks of British Empire* (Oxford UP, 2015).

4. My own work on insurgency and colonial literary cultures in India traces similar transactions. See Alex Tickell, *Terrorism, Insurgency and Indian-English Literature, 1830–1947* (Routledge, 2012).

5. See Timothy Brennan's *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Harvard UP, 1997), for an early formulation of this argument, which was developed by Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (Routledge, 2001). For a more recent appraisal of a self-reflexive "re-orientalism" in postcolonial fiction, see Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes, editors, *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within* (Routledge, 2011).

6. For an account of the literary representation of "adventuring" colonial children, see Martin Green's *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*, and the chapter on "Bringing up the Empire" in Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness*. The athletic and team-games contexts of imperial education are analysed by J. A. Mangan in *The Games Ethic and Imperialism*.

7. I use this term to refer to a process of three-way comparison, in which two seemingly quite different texts are linked through a third. This critical configuration is discussed further in my conclusion.

Works Cited

- Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. Routledge, 2000.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction*. Oxford UP, 2002.
- . *Indian Arrivals 1870–1915: Networks of British Empire*. Oxford UP, 2015.
- Bose, Brinda. “In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*.” *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things*, edited by Alex Tickell. Routledge, 2007, pp. 120–32.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*. Cornell UP, 1997.
- Brennan, Timothy. *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*. Harvard UP, 1997.
- Chisholm, Anne. *Rumer Godden: A Storyteller’s Life*. Macmillan, 1998.
- Choroba, Claire Elizabeth. “Gardens in the Writing of Rumer Godden: A Critical Examination.” Unpublished PhD thesis. Milton Keynes: The Open U, December 2015.
- Clayton, Jay and Eric Rothstein, editors. *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*. U of Wisconsin P, 1991.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. “Paranoia, Pollution, and Sexuality: Affiliations between E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*.” *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, edited by Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel. Indiana UP, 2005, pp. 245–61.
- Godden, Jon and Rumer. *Two under the Indian Sun*. Macmillan, 1966.
- Godden, Rumer. *Black Narcissus*. Virago, 2013.
- . *The Peacock Spring*. Pan, 1992.
- . *The River*. Pan, 2004.
- Green, Martin. *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- Hassan, Ihab H. “The Problem of Influence in Literary History: Notes Towards a Definition.” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 14, 1955, pp. 66–76.
- Hopkins, Lucy. “‘What Will Sophie Mol Think?’: Thinking Critically About the Figure of the White Child in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*.” *Global Studies of Childhood*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2011, pp. 280–90.
- Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. Routledge, 2001.

- Krylov, Ivan Andreevich. *Krilof and his Fables*. Translated by W. R. S. Ralston, Strahan and Company, 1871.
- Lassner, Phyllis B. *Colonial Strangers: Women Writing the End of the British Empire*. Rutgers UP, 2004.
- Lau, Lisa and Ana Cristina Mendes, editors. *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within*. Routledge, 2011.
- . “Romancing the Other: Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021989418820701>
- Le-Guilcher, Lucy and Phyllis B. Lassner. *Rumer Godden: International and Intermodern Storyteller*. Ashgate, 2010.
- Mangan, J. A. *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspect of the Diffusion of an Ideal*. Penguin 1986.
- Orr, Mary. *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*. Polity, 2003.
- Ransome, Arthur. 1930. *Swallows and Amazons*. Random House, 2001.
- Rosenthal, Lynne M. *Rumer Godden Revisited*. Twayne, 1996.
- Roy, Nilanjana. “Rumer’s Raj: The Return of a Classic.” *Business Standard*, 11 March 2013.
- Sebag-Montefiore, Mary. “Rumer Godden.” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*, edited by Jack Zipes. Oxford UP, 2006, pp. 150–51.
- Tickell, Alex. *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things*. Routledge, 2007.
- . *Terrorism, Insurgency and Indian-English Literature, 1830–1947*. Routledge, 2012.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature*. Columbia UP, 2015.