Chapter Six  

Ayemenem: Interrogating Big Voices

The final novel this study intends to discuss is Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. She is the first resident Indian writer to win the Booker-McConnell Prize in 1997 for her debut novel and it remains her only fictional endeavour to date. A trained architect, she has since shifted to political activism. She vocalises her dissent in her non-fictional works like *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* (2005) and *Listening to the Grasshoppers: Field Notes in Democracy* (2009) which are a collection of her influential essays and *The Shape of the Beast* (2008) includes a set of her semi-informal conversations with N. Ram, David Barsamian, Anthony Arnove and a few others. Roy has written two screen plays *In which Annie Give It Those Ones* (1988) and *Electric Moon*, and a pair of controversial essays “The Great Indian Rape Trick” (Parts 1 and II) which charges Shekhar Kapoor for misrepresenting and undermining the legendary dacoit Phoolan Devi’s life-history through his film, *Bandit Queen* (1994). Projecting her as the conscience of the nation, writer Meena Kandaswamy observes: “She stands at the forefront of every struggle where the Indian state acts against the interest of its citizens. She was against the Narmada Dam, India’s Nuclear Weapon’s Test at Pokhran, the police-paramilitary oppression of the Adivasis, she is upset by the civilian killings in Kashmir”(qtd in Gunasekaran 1). Though Roy has not been the first to raise these issues, Kandaswamy claims that she wields her global celebrity status to bring international attention to these issues in India. Roy
feels that the injustice around her gives her writing a mission: “To be a writer in a country where something akin to an undeclared civil war is being waged on its citizens in the name of ‘development’ is an onerous responsibility” (“Ladies have Feelings”190). Speaking of this responsibility she continues: “The trouble is that once you see it, you can’t unsee it. And once you’ve seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There’s no innocence. Either way, you are accountable”(192-93). The central preoccupation of both her fiction and non-fictional writings, she reiterates “is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they’re engaged in” (“Come September”13). However, she has often been accused of not offering any alternative to the present order. Natasha Walter, in her review in the Guardian Weekly maintains that “even if Roy has no interest in putting forward ideas for a better world, at least she has the desire to make us notice what is happening to this one” (“A Passionate Writer”). The God of Small Things (cited hereafter as Small Things) has been inundated with accolades and at the same time courted controversy. The novel has been extolled for its innovative style and criticised for its politics and sexual transgressions. Scholars have made theoretical readings of the novel on varied levels such as the feminist, postcolonial, psycho-analytical, Marxist, postmodernist and the stylistic. This chapter purports to examine how the concept of regionalism is assimilated in the novel. Just as Anita Nair and Kavery Nambisan have explored their respective regions in their novels, Ayemenem becomes Roy’s chosen locale.
for her narrative. To her mother’s query on having chosen Ayemenem as the village and the Meenachal as the river, Roy elucidates: ‘‘Because I want people to know that we have stories.’ It’s not that India has no stories. Of course we have stories—beautiful and brilliant ones. But those stories, because of the languages in which they’re written, are not privileged. So nobody knows them” (“Development Nationalism”77).

Roy’s definitive views on the concept of what a region should be, is evident in her essay “The End of Imagination”, where she questions the very notion of an ‘Indian’ identity and of the existence of an ‘Indian’ civilisation. She affirms:

There’s no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian. There is no Divine Committee that has the right to sanction one single, authorised version of what India is or should be. There is no one religion or language or caste or region or person or story or book that can claim to be its sole representative. (37)

Thus she makes it explicit that there is not a single vision of India but “there are, and can only be, visions of India” and various perspectives of seeing it. This idea is echoed in the epigraph to Small Things which Roy quotes from John Berger, “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one.” The novel narrates not one story but a number of them encompassing four generations and she connects her region with others of the state, the country, and even with those of other continents. The narrative makes use of several “texts” to narrate itself which
include encyclopedias, atlases, novels, dramas, fairytales, films, music and theatre. The very first chapter of the novel introduces most of the characters and almost all the events that are related to the Ipe family of Ayemenem. Hence the varied stories that are presented in the novel “have no secrets” as in the kathakali stories but “are the ones you have heard and want to hear again” (229).

The local spectators who watch a kathakali performance are familiar with its stories drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha. Roy constructs her narrative through the appropriation of this technique. Julie Mullaney claims that this sense of being mesmerized by the performances of stories already known becomes the basis for the construction of the novel (56).

Despite its conventional plot, what makes the novel unique is the manner of its narration, the language used and the treatment of the intricacies of the locale.

Set in Ayemenem in the Kottayam district of south Kerala, the plot of Small Things pivots around the feudal Syrian Christian family of the Ipes. The plot develops around the ill-fated forbidden relationship of the high caste Ammu, the twins’ mother and the untouchable, Velutha. The death of the English Sophie Mol (Ammu’s brother, Chacko’s daughter) by drowning in the Meenachal river sparks off the events in the story. To save themselves and their mother the twins are forced by their grand aunt, Baby Kochamma to testify Velutha as the murderer. The realisation that they had unknowingly been responsible for the brutal death of their beloved Velutha in the police station shatters their childhood leading to their estrangement.
Roy’s close acquaintance with the Syrian Christian community of Kottayam, to which she belongs, features predominantly in her novel. The Syrian Christians popularly known as ‘Suriyani Christians’ claim to have the most ancient Christian tradition in India (Kulirani 1349). The legend of St Thomas, disciple of Jesus Christ who landed at Cranganore on the Kerala coast in 52 AD and converted high caste Hindu families remains an integral part of their identity. The family in Roy’s novel considers themselves to be the privileged descendants of Reverend E. John Ipe (known as Punyan Kunju—the Little Blessed One), a priest of the Mar Thoma church who had been blessed by Patriarch of Antioch of the sovereign head of the Syrian Christian Church (22-23). The Syrian Christians who trace their origins to Apostle Thomas have been encapsulated within the caste society for centuries and share a recognised place in it. James Massey claims that around 1020 AD the Syrian Christians were accorded the status of caste Hindus. They were given a list of seventy-two privileges including the right to ride an elephant, to be preceded by drums and trumpets and have criers announcing their approach so that people from lower castes would withdraw into the streets (17). Since then they claim to be of high caste Hindu descent as well as function as a caste community in Kerala and their churches observe this rigid caste discrimination as well. Though they practise untouchability like the local Hindus and also share many customs in common with them, the community harbours prejudice towards high caste Hindus and even with other sects in the Christian community.
The Syrian Christians who populate Kottayam and its neighbouring areas in large numbers cultivated an ally in the Empire and with the English language to propagate its growth in the region. The community tried to master the language by educating their children in elite colleges and thus turned out to be a “living proof of the success of Macaulay’s civilising mission” (John 26). The community’s fascination for the colonialist ideology is evident in Pappachi whom Roy projects to be a stereotypical victim of the colonial project. In the stifling heat of Ayemenem, the Imperial Entomologist wore his “well pressed three-piece suit and his gold pocket watch” (49) and went around in his sky blue Plymouth, bought from an old Englishman in Munnar. His daughter, Ammu refers to the Oxford educated, Pappachi as “an incurable British CCP, which was short for chhi-chhi poach and in Hindi meant shit-wiper” (51). Pappachi “was charming and urbane with visitors, and stopped short of fawning on them if they happened to be white” (18). When Ammu cites the reason of her divorce being the attempted rape of Mr. Hollick, her husband’s English boss, Pappachi refuses to believe her “not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn’t believe that an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another man’s wife” (42). Roy explains through Chacko, that such people were called Anglophiles (people whose mind was brought to a state which made them behave like the English)—Pappachi was one and so were all the members of the Ipe family: “Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints
had been swept away” (52). Though Chacko’s wife, Margaret was a “shopkeeper’s daughter” (167), Mammachi and Baby Kochamma respect her for being English. The grand preparations for Sophie Mol’s arrival and the training lessons in English given to the twins to meet Sophie Mol are also on this account. Even Ammu’s mindset wishes for “a smooth performance” from her children (145). The love for the English texts and movies ingrained in the twins at a very early age are “extended exercise[s] in Anglophilia” (55). The Imperial Entomologist, the Rhodes scholar, the Plymouth car, Elvis records, the playing of Handel's Water Music on the violin – are all caricatured in the novel to impart the inability of the community to shake off its colonial hangover.

Roy projects the class antagonism and class exploitation in terms of caste. Caste segregation is prevalent in all the regions of the country but in Kerala this pollution is more deeply ingrained and assigned a greater importance. Roy refers to Kerala as a complex society being simultaneously progressive and parochial (“The Colonization” 31). In Kerala, although Christianity, Hinduism and Islam coexist in harmony and the state has the highest literacy rate, the region still continues to be caste-ridden and male-dominated. Issues related to caste and the treatment of the untouchables has been earlier addressed by Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. Rao’s attempt was to bring a village steeped in orthodoxy under the sway of the Gandhian movement and the upliftment of the untouchables formed only a part of it. In Anand’s Untouchable, Bakha is the uneducated untouchable longing to break free of the oppressive caste system. Despite the inhuman treatment meted
out, he refrains from converting to Christianity. The treatment of the Dalits is one of the major concerns of *Small Things*. After the British occupied Malabar, a number of lower caste Hindus (like the Paravans, Pulayas and Pelayas) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church in the hope of being freed from the curse of untouchability. Mammachi offers historical information regarding the pathetic conditions endured by the Paravans in the olden times when they had to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves. They were not allowed to walk on public roads, cover their upper bodies and had “to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed” (74). Ayemenem and nearby areas of Kottayam had a sizable population of converted Christians who were promised equality status on embracing Christianity. The converts, known as the Rice-Christians soon realised that “they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire” (74) as they continued being treated as the lowest layer within the Christian community:

They [Paravans] were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. After independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was a little like having to sweep
away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all. (74)

In his fictional work, *The House of Blue Mangoes* (2002), David Davidar crystallises the issues of ostracism practised against the untouchables and the women in his fictitious village of Chevathar in Tamil Nadu. Davidar’s description of the treatment meted out to the new converts (26) bears a close resemblance to that of the Paravans mentioned earlier in Roy’s novel.

In *Small Things*, the Dalit family of Vellya Pappen and his two sons, Kuttappen and Velutha have endured this scourge for ages. Generations of servitude and his personal gratitude for the mortgaged glass eye makes Vellya Pappen, the “Old World Paravan” (76), disclose the “unthinkable” affair between Velutha and Ammu to his landlords. Kuttappen unlike his brother was “a good, safe Paravan” who “could neither read nor write” (207). Velutha who belongs to the new generation of Paravans is a skilled carpenter and a member of the Communist Party. As a child he would bring tiny hand-made toys and would hold them out to Ammu so that she could take them without touching him. He had attended the Untouchables’ School founded by Punnyan Kunju and had learnt carpentry from Johann Klein, a carpenter from the carpenter’s guild in Bavaria when he had conducted a workshop in Kottayam. Mammachi says if “he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (75).

Deeply rooted in the geo-cultural reality of Ayemenem are the issues of patriarchy and the subalternity of women. Pappachi, the male chauvinist, finds it difficult to tolerate his exceptionally
talented and enterprising wife, Mammachi whom he beats every night with a brass vase. As he feels that college education was unnecessary for a girl, Ammu is forced to return to Aymenem after his retirement from Delhi. On Pappachi’s demise, his son Chacko, “an Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality” resigns his job as a lecturer in Madras and returns to Ayemenem (65). Though Mammachi had been running her pickle business quite successfully till then, her son displaces her from the management, registers it as a partnership and informs Mammachi that she was “the sleeping partner”(57). Despite the fact that Ammu did as much work in the factory, Chacko referred to anything related to the factory as “his” and makes it clear to Ammu that “‘what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine’”(57). To carry on his libertine relationships with the women of the pickle factory, Mammachi had a separate entrance built for Chacko’s room. She slipped money to the “objects of his ‘Needs’” which they took because “they had young children and old parents. Or husbands who spent all their earnings in toddy bars”(169). This patriarchal domination exhibited by some other male characters as well, assist the novelist to forcefully put across the exploitative nature of the society that cruelly crush the helpless lot of women, children and the downtrodden.

In a closed and claustrophobic society as the Ayemenem community, the individual acts of resistance and subversion are overwhelmed by the crushing weight of customs. The moral code of conduct imposed on its members brings to light the pettiness of the Ipe family. Roy’s juxtaposition of Chacko’s sexual advances to the factory workers with Ammu’s “transgressive” affair with Velutha
brutally exposes the differences meted out to the siblings within the family. This double morality of the traditional conservative society is manifest in the lot of the first generation of women in the novel who willingly succumb to patriarchal dominance. Mammachi’s acceptance of Chacko’s “Man’s Needs” converts to one of unmanageable fury when it comes to her daughter:

She [Ammu] had defiled generations of breeding (The Little Blessed One . . . an Imperial Entomologist, a Rhodes Scholar from Oxford) and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, for ever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They’d nudge and whisper. It was all finished now. (258)

Ammu, a divorcee from a marriage to a Bengali Hindu is forced to come back to her home in Ayemenem. At the age of twenty-eight she knew that her life had been lived and she had no more chances: “There was only Ayemenem now. A front verandah and a back verandah. A hot river and a pickle factory. And in the background, the constant, high, whining mewl of local disapproval” (43). Ammu and her children are alienated and undergo humiliation. The “play” staged in verandah of Ayemenem House on the arrival of Sophie Mol and her English mother reinforces Ammu’s “Locusts Stand I” (57) in the house. Roy is here referring to the personal experiences encountered by her own mother, Mary Roy who had to return to her family home after her divorce. As Syrian Christian women were not entitled to any rights in their parental home, Mary Roy had approached court thereby securing a
verdict in her favour. Later she had set up a school, Corpus Christie similar to the one Ammu plans to begin in *Small Things*. Being the offsprings of an intercaste marriage and even more the children of a divorced Syrian Christian mother who had no rights in her parental home, their standing in the family hierarchy is made clear from the narrative. Baby Kochamma spitefully addresses the children as “Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry” and wants them to realise that they were living on sufferance in their maternal grandmother’s house. Her own inability to get married to Father Mulligan which becomes her lifelong malady makes her resent Ammu whom she saw quarrelling with her fate –“the fate of the wretched Man-less woman“(45). Ammu slips into a forbidden love affair with Velutha, the Paravan knowing quite well the price she would have to pay for defying the prevailing caste restrictions: “Two lives, Two children’s childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders” (336). The social taboos not only alienate Ammu and destroy Velutha but also trap the twins into the family’s conspiracy of eliminating Velutha. This leaves Estha mentally and emotionally wounded plunging him into a world of silence while Rahel suffers from utter insecurity. After Estha is “Returned” to his father in Calcutta, Ammu moves away from the Ayemenem house and Rahel stays back. Roy like Rahel was educated by the family and she says it was “like being at the top of the bottom of the heap–without the blinkered single-mindedness of the completely oppressed nor the flabby self-indulgence of the well-to-do” (“The Colonization” 34).
Roy empowers her marginal characters to blossom into their true selves once they abandon the confines of their home-town. Ammu elopes with the Bengali she meets in Calcutta to escape from the stifling atmosphere of Ayemenem. She returns only to be dragged into a liaison with the Paravan. Rahel leaves for Delhi to learn architecture where she meets Larry McCaslin who appreciates her for being “a jazz tune”(18). Later, her job at a petrol station in New York lands her into a world of violence and mayhem. Aijaz Ahmad observes: “The leaving of the family home and the sowing of wild oats endows her with an autonomous self that would have been denied to her, as it was denied to her mother, in the stifling world of the provincial, caste-bound gentility of her family”(“Reading”105). Even Velutha is shown to be assertive as he ventures out of Ayemenem. Ultimately, Roy’s characters return to the Ayemenem community of Baby Kochamma(s) and K.N.M Pillai(s) that fails to come out of its strait-jacketed conventions. In this context Aijaz Ahmed’s argument is relevant. He observes that “culture is not always a zone of freedom, self-expression, self-realisation, community-sharing, etc. Culture, including traditional culture, is just as frequently a zone of Un-freedom and entrapment, as any number of oppressed members of specific communities can tell you”(On Communalism 107).

The period the novel is set in, lets Roy use Christianity and Marxism, the two historically momentous factors in the political and social formation of Kerala as an engaging backdrop of the novel. Murari Prasad notes: “Christianity sustains the divisions
inherited from Hinduism; Marxism just like a superficial graft, accommodates residual feudalism and traditional caste divides” ("Articulating the Marginal"162). To the wealthy, estate-owning Syrian Christians of Kerala who voted for the Congress party, Communism “represented a fate worse than death” (66). This is mirrored through the reaction of Baby Kochamma at the Communist rally on her way to Cochin. The insult by one of the protestors makes her hold Velutha indirectly responsible for it. Roy attempts to analyse the reasons for the growth of the Communist movement especially in Kerala and Bengal:

The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (66-67)

The novelist furnishes details of Kerala being the first state to democratically elect a Communist government to power in 1957 under the veteran leader E.M.S Namboodiripad. The Communists find themselves in a piquant situation, “having to govern a people and foment revolution simultaneously” (67). The next two years of their regime found Kerala on the brink of a civil war. The government which was dismissed by Nehru came back to power ten years later. The peaceful measures now adopted by
Namboodiripad angered the Chinese Communists who switched their patronage to the new, militant faction of the communist party, the Naxalites. Roy gives a description of the atrocities committed by them in the Palaghat region just as Nair does in *The Better Man*. Namboodiripad expelled the Naxalites from his party. The rally mentioned in the novel that takes place in Cochin as a result of this also demands certain rights for the labourers and the Dalits. The keg of ancient anger against caste discrimination fuses with the class struggle as also the militancy of the Naxalite movement and amalgamates into the rally of which Velutha becomes a part of. Nevertheless, they end up being mere pawns in the complex game of power politics.

The novel brings out the complicity of the Communist leaders in sustaining the ossified social practices through the caricatured K.N.M. Pillai. The Comrade being the next candidate for the Kottayam by-elections and ironically described as “Ayemenem’s own Crusader for Justice” and “Spokesman of the Oppressed” sees Velutha’s ‘untouchability’ as a threat due to his position in the party (303). When accused of the false murder of Sophie Mol and the rape of Ammu, Velutha, the only card holding member of the party, approaches the local communist leader for protection. However, Pillai spurns him saying that “it is not in the Party’s interests to take up such matters. Individuals’ interest is subordinate to the organisation’s interests. Violating Party Discipline means violating Party Unity”(287). Pillai’s Press that prints labels for the pickle factory surreptitiously holds meetings in the evenings to urge its workers on to a revolution: “In his
speeches he managed a clever mix of pertinent local issues and grand Maoist rhetoric which sounded even grander in Malayalam” (120). Pillai represents a degenerate political tradition which is nothing more than a means of self-promotion to cling on to the citadel of local power by playing the old “divide and rule” game. Chacko, the self proclaimed Marxist and owner of the pickle factory (“trying on different costumes that he blurred the battle lines”[122]) is apprehensive of Velutha’s association with the party and fears that his low caste status might antagonise the other workers. As Velutha is adept in handling machines, he is indispensable to the factory. The problem is solved by Mammachi who pays Velutha “less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan” (77). The factory is witness to the replay of the power structure and exploitation of the women. Chacko entices pretty women to his room on the pretext of lecturing them on labour rights and trade union law. Roy’s depiction of the Communist movement and her sarcastic references to the comrades has evoked sharp criticism. It is to be admitted that Roy has made certain distortions by evading the positive attributes of the Communist movement and also the role of E.M.S in his fight against casteism in Kerala. However, to be fair to Roy, the novel need not be read as an assault on communism as it has to be acknowledged that “she has treated all her characters as well as opinions across the political spectrum alike, with the same degree of critical detachment and sarcasm” (Raveendran, Texts 94). The social apparatuses like the church, the school and the police – all find themselves at the end of the firing line. The
church ordained to be the upholder of values promotes segregation and refuses to bury Ammu on account of her “transgressive” act. The police and politicians forming a nexus turn out to be “mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine” (262). Roy satirises the puritanical attitude of the Christian missionaries through the convent school and exposes the ideological and political programmes behind the visits of Christian missionaries.

The architect in Roy builds and renovates houses in her novel with flair and an eye for intricate details. Roy explores her region in terms of the three different spaces in the novel. The grandiose Ayemenem house with its pickle factory and the Plymouth is firmly located in the narrative: “Nine steps led from the driveway up to the front verandah. The elevation gave it a dignity of a stage and everything that happened there took on the aura and significance of a performance” (165). The house is central to the narrative that unfolds itself by expressing a way of life. The abandoned Kari Saipu’s house across the Meenachal river which stood in the middle of a rubber estate constitutes the second space. The house that had been empty for years is believed to be haunted by the ghost of an” Englishman [Kari Saipu] who had ‘gone native’” (52). He was the Black Sahib who had assimilated into the Kerala culture, “who spoke Malayalam and wore mundus. Ayemenem’s own Kurtz” (52). Despite being an Englishman, he was alienated from the Ayemenem society on the grounds of his homosexual relations and had later shot himself. The ghostly colonial vestige of Kari Saipu’s bungalow is later mistaken by the twins for the History
House referred to by Chacko, by which he means the edifice of European history from which Indians are barred: “‘But we can’t go in,’ . . . ‘because we’ve been locked out’” (53). The twins seek shelter here after running away from home where they witness History re-enact itself to suppress the subaltern, “to negotiate its terms and collect its dues” (199). B. Hariharan, in his article “Orienting Spaces of Living” regards the Ayemenem house to be almost like a mirror image of Kari Saipu’s house: “Both houses have little secrets and seem to announce their presence in the landscape” (89). In contrast to these two houses stands Velutha’s hut huddled by coconut, mango, cashew and bilimbi trees and the river flowing behind it:

On the edge of the clearing, with its back to the river, a low hut with walls of orange laterite plastered with mud and a thatched roof nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret. The low walls of the hut were the same colour as the earth they stood on, and seemed to have germinated from a house-seed planted in the ground, from which right-angled ribs of earth had risen and enclosed space. (205)

Twenty-three years later, when Rahel returns, the Ayemenem house reflects a tale of the gradual decadence. The house, once a symbol of grandeur is now a place where “filth had laid siege” (88). The Plymouth, no longer in use had settled firmly in the ground and the signboard of the pickle factory “rotted and fell inwards like a collapsed crown” (295). While the older houses nestled among
the rubber trees, around Ayemenem, now sprang “the new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places” (13). Ayemenem’s population had swelled into a little town still masquerading as a village.

Globalization forges inroads into the landscape of little towns in the guise of the tourism industry. Manifestations of this are apparent in Small Things, with the conversion of Kari Saipu’s house into a Five Star Hotel named “Heritage.” As the waters of the Meenachal have become thick and toxic, the Hotel has its own swimming pools. However, as “the trees were still green, the sky still blue” as Roy sarcastically puts it, the brochures described their “smelly paradise” as ‘God’s Own Country’ (125). The “Regional Flavour” is enhanced through the truncated performances of kathakali staged by the artists near the swimming pools: “While the drummers drummed and the dancers danced, hotel guests frolicked with their children in the water” (127). The back verandah of the house where Velutha was beaten to death by the policemen is converted to the airy hotel kitchen where “the disembowelling of lesser mammals” (127) takes place. As a promotional gimmick, the hotel staff enlighten their guests that the main building of the hotel had been the ancestral home of Comrade E.M.S Namboodiripad, “‘Kerala’s Mao Tse-tung’” (126). Cultural artefacts that came with the House were kept for display “with edifying placards which said Traditional Kerala Umbrella and Traditional Bridal dowry Box.” In her discussion of tourism in Kerala, Annapurna Garimella draws attention to this trend of showcasing: “Like many first-world
countries that transcended their feudal and later their industrial or colonial origins only to recoup and recast them as culture and tradition, Kerala’s middle and upper classes too are embracing rejected traditions” (47). This “Regional Flavour” using kathakali is also exploited by Chacko in the billboard of *Paradise Pickles & Preserves* (127). It becomes yet another instance in the narrative signifying “History and Literature enlisted by commerce” (126). E.V. Ramakrishnan argues: “In the absence of an active public sphere, culture would become mere entertainment, a leisure activity with no social significance. The hegemony of globalization reduces culture to a bazaar of exotica with no deeper history” (13).

Kathakali, the classical performing art of Kerala has been used as a prominent motif to convey the deterioration that has seeped into the cultural tradition of Kerala. The novel refers to the times when kathakali was performed in the local temple courtyards when the story that unfolded late at night ended only in the early hours of dawn. Globalization and the market economy have forced the kathakali artists to turn this traditional dance form to yet another commodity merely for their survival: “So ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos”(127). His own children who have become clerks, bus conductors and class IV non-gazetted officers deride him: “In despair he turns to tourism. He enters the market. He hawks the only thing he owns. The stories that his body can tell”(230). Through her representation of kathakali, Roy implicates the cultural commodification of this indigenous art form.
The exposure to the cultures and commodities of the West increasingly alienates “Foreign Returnees” from their homeland by creating a “false sense of kinship with non-Western cultures” (Ramakrishnan 13). Roy’s description of them at the Cochin airport lays bare her cynicism:

And there they were, the Foreign Returnees, in wash’n’wear suits and rainbow glasses. With an end to grinding poverty in their Aristocrat suitcases. With cement roofs for their thatched houses, and geysers for their parents’ bathrooms[. . . .]Maxis and high heels. Puff sleeves and lipstick. Mixy-grinders and automatic flashes for their cameras [. . . .] With a hunger for kappa and meen vevichathu that they hadn’t eaten for so long. With love and a lick of shame that their families who had come to meet them were so . . . so . . . gawkish. *Look at the way they dressed! Surely they had more suitable airport wear! Why did Malayalees have such awful teeth?*

And the airport itself! More like the local bus depot! The birdshit on the building! Oh the spitstains on the kangaroos!

*Oho! Going to the dogs India is.* (140)

Globalization’s cultural influence takes its toll on characters like Baby Kochamma too. She had transferred her unrequited love for the Irish Jesuit to raise a “fierce, bitter garden”(26). After half a century’s “pernickety attention, the ornamental garden had been
abandoned” for a new love: “She presided over the World in her drawing room on satellite TV” (27). The change was not a gradual one but something that happened overnight:

Blondes, wars, famines, football, sex, music, coups d’état – they all arrived on the same train. They unpacked together. . . . And in Ayemenem, where once the loudest sound had been the musical bus horn, now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants. And so while her ornamental garden wilted and died, Baby Kochamma . . . watched The Bold and The Beautiful and Santa Barbara. . . . (27)

The captivating stuff she encounters does not ease her frustrations in any way but alienates her from her home and her world. Her old fears of the Marxist-Leninist menace are rekindled by the growing numbers of disposed people and she views “ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture” (28). Roy posits globalization to be another permutation of the coloniser’s practice which elides and glosses over socio-cultural moorings of the varied regions.

By placing the inter-caste relationship at the centre of the novel, Roy equates it to the entrenched social inequities prevalent in the Kerala society. She places these socially sanctioned terms under the umbrella term of History (capitalised). Innumerable such references to History are strewn all over the novel as “History’s smell” (55), History in live performance (309), “History’s twisted
chickens would come home to roost” (283) and “History walking the dog” (288) to mention a few. The recurrence of the word History in the novel is not to present a stable pattern of facts and events but to reinforce the weight it imposes upon the present lives of its characters. Priyamvada Gopal considers this “persistent underscoring of ‘History’ not only as a determining force but as a self-evidently explanatory category [which] has the paradoxical effect of emphasizing the workings of Big God” (158). For Roy, History becomes a potpourri of numerous instances from the lives of her characters, thus sacrificing chronology. Roy reconstitutes her narrative with a thorough mixing of history and story, fact and fiction, the private and the public, and the big and small things. She interrogates western linear historiography through the metaphor of the Earth woman. Chacko describes the Earth woman, the four-thousand six-hundred-million-years-old earth to be a forty-six-year-old woman like their Aleyamma teacher. As the first animals appeared only when she was forty, human civilisation, the most recent “began only two hours ago in the Earth Woman’s life” (54). Hence Chacko makes the twins understand that “the whole of contemporary history, the World Wars, the War of Dreams, the Man on the Moon, science, literature, philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge—was no more than a blink of the Earth Woman’s eye”(54). By radically deviating from the dominant model of historiography prevalent for over a century, Roy’s intention is to deflate man’s claim to superiority over histories on account of his reason by unlocking the laws of the universe. In doing so, she
reaffirms the significance of the existence of the “small things” while contrasting it with man’s diminutive role in the cosmos.

Beneath the grand monolithic narratives of national and international worlds – caste, socialism and patriarchy– that refuse to acknowledge the ‘small voices’, there exists another world belonging to the “small things”. This world is implicit in the novel. In a conversation with David Barsamian, Roy voices her firm views on the inconsistencies of the western concepts of using reason to understand the universe (“The Colonization” 41). Her plea is “to respect and revere the earth’s secrets.” Roy’s effort is not to isolate the ordinary man from understanding things happening around him and to him but “to create links, to join the dots, to tell politics like a story, to communicate it, to make it real” (“The Colonization” 36). This would be to make a connection between a man narrating to his child about his life in a village before it was submerged by a reservoir and connecting it to the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank. For Roy, her novel becomes a subtle mediation of this interconnectedness:

The God of Small Things is a book which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest. Whether it is the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of the water in a pond or the quality of moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, . . . into the most intimate relationships between people–parents and children, siblings and so on.” (“The Colonization” 36)
The world as seen mainly through the consciousness of Rahel intensely registers the minute details of the environment. The narrative opens with a description of the south-west monsoon in Ayemenem: “The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles . . . . And small fish appear in puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways” (1). From this very delightfully realistic opening description to the very end, the “whisper and scurry of small lives” pulsates throughout the novel.

The concept of a bioregion where man and the region are not two separate but interdependent entities, as discussed in the first chapter, has been exemplified through Roy’s text. The Meenachal river (originally the Meenachilaru in Aymanam) cuts through the narrative and into the lives of the members of the Ayemenem House. The river forms the backdrop of the Ammu-Velutha relationship and is the silent witness to the tragic death of Sophie Mol. The river is presented in two time frames in the novel— the old and the new. The old river was unfathomable and Kuttappen warns the children of its treacherous nature. The twins learn to fish and swim in the Meenachal. The river had taught them “the bright language of the dragonflies” (203) and the lessons of silence, patience and observance. Roy reveals their intimacy with the river:

They [the twins] knew the slippery stone steps (thirteen) before the slimy mud began. They knew the afternoon weed that flowed inwards from the backwaters of Komarakom. They knew the smaller fish.
The flat, foolish pallathi, the silver paral, the wily, whiskered koori, the sometimes karimeen. (203)

The river, in a sense provides solace to the characters of the novel. Rahel dreams of the river as they anxiously wait for Sophie Mol at the airport, Estha (re-Returned) walks on the banks of the river and Ammu spends the best moments of her life with Velutha here.

The environmental crisis which has been a major issue of discussion in Roy’s essays could be extrapolated from her fictional narrative. Human actions such as destruction of forests and building of dams result in regional imbalance. Radhakamal Mukherjee observes that “the region is not a passive entity but a living organism which exhibits the harmonious working of different living systems such as vegetable, the animal and the human worlds” (23). The new Meenachal river with its “smell of shit” (125) and plastic bags floating on its weedy surface presents the pitiable plight of most rivers in contemporary Kerala. Owing to the excessive use of pesticides bought with the World Bank loans, the fish in the river had died and those that survived suffered from fin-rot. The old river which could evoke fear had shrunk into a mere trickle but “she had grown” (124). The saltwater barrage built to regulate the inflow of saltwater from the backwaters (that opened in the Arabian Sea) makes explicit the dubious motives of the political parties and the government who vied for votes from the influential farmer lobby. Ayemenem now had two harvests instead of one: “More rice, for the price of a river” (124). Roy’s indictment is also towards the Green Revolution for its failure to address the issue of the diminishing productivity of the land by bringing canal
irrigation, digging bore wells and by the indiscriminate use of chemical fertilisers. “The fight against the Sardar Sarovar dam”, says Roy, “has come to represent far more than a fight for one river” (“The Greater Common”49). It has raised doubts about an entire political system:

What is at issue now is the very nature of our democracy. Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its forests? Its fish? These are huge questions. . . .They are being answered in one voice by every institution at its command- the army, the police, the bureaucracy, the courts. And not just answered, but answered unambiguously in bitter, brutal ways” (“The Greater Common”50).

Roy strikes at the Indian government and the World Bank for their insensitivity to the despair of the innumerable tribals in the Narmada Valley and her observations are reminiscent of Small Things: “Who are these gods that govern us? Is there no limit to their powers?”(132).

In a perceptive study of the novel, “Of Gods and Gods and Men”, M.K. Naik writes that it is Velutha who gives the novel its title (225). Ammu visualises him as the God of small things, of belonging to the history and culture of the land: “That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars” (333-34). It could be one of the ways in which Roy gives agency to “the small voices of history” through her text. Though Roy presents the subaltern male to be efficient
and talented, he suffers at attempting to make an upward social mobility from his “untouchable” status. Arguably though, the title does not equate to Velutha alone. The novel glorifies the trivial and insignificant things. Jason Cowley, one of the five Booker prize judges, deliberating on “Why we Chose Arundhati” opines that her achievement lies in never forgetting the small things of life, “the insects and flowers, wind and water, the outcaste and the despised” (28). The symbolism is inherent in the very title of the chapter entitled “Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti.” The Laltain signifies the grand narratives of religion, caste, society and tradition which combine forces to crush the individual. The “small things” that Rahel describes are the ones that are often glossed over by history and its various representations. She alludes to the larger hegemonic forces operating in the name of societal norms that wipe the “small things” out of existence. Indirectly, Roy says it’s time we supported our small heroes “to fight specific wars in specific ways”:

Who knows, perhaps that’s what the twenty-first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there’s a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. (“The Greater Common”53)

The title also suggests, as John Mee puts it “the dislocations between the ‘Small God’ of individual lives and the Big God of the
nation” (375). The Big/ Small binary is juxtaposed throughout the text:

The life in the novel is divided into two set forces, locked in a grim mortal fight. The upper world consists of the burden of history, dead limbs of tradition, family culture and pride, patriarchy and political opportunism— the God of Big Things. The other layer comprises children, insecure women, untouchables and working people with their struggle for identity and independence, and natural urges and desires— the God of Small Things. (Sharma and Talwar 46-47)

While Naik traces the title to be an echo of the Shakespearean lines ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport’ [King Lear IV.i. 36-37] (“Of Gods” 226). P.P. Raveendran detects the theme of sin and guilt consciousness in the novel to have an ideological affinity with Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and traces the title to be an “unconscious take-off of the following lines from Part VII of Coleridge’s poem: “He prayeth best, who loveth best/ All things great and small; / for the dear God who loveth us,/ He made and loveth all” (Texts 93).

Though the narrative is chronologically divided between the 1960s and the 1990s, a major portion of it hinges itself to the past and around the events of December 1969 with the arrival of Sophie Mol. The narrative mode, however, makes it apparent that it was “only one way of looking at it” and “it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago” (33). Roy maps those
thousand years with references to concrete historical facts relating to the conquests of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British and then even to times before Christianity came to Kerala and to the days when the Love Laws were made. The constant back and forth shifting of the narrative indicates the non-linear progress of the novel. Roy makes use of the devices of cinematic technique with flashbacks and flash forwards as William Faulkner does in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) to narrate the story of the Compson family.

Roy weaves her narrative strategies with the oppressive socio-cultural realities that her characters are confronted with. In doing so it closely overlaps Ranajit Guha’s theorising of the “small voices of history.” Guha observes that when the small voices get a hearing, it will do so only by “interrupting the telling in the dominant version, breaking up its storyline and making a mess of its plot” (“The Small Voice” 316). As a major part of the story is narrated as seen through the eyes of Rahel, it is only natural that the trauma encountered by the children has forced her narrative as well as Roy’s to shudder and “to leave none of its nuances, values, associations, and contests standing where they had been in the original” (Guha, “The Authority” 476). In a novel which gives prominence to the small voices such tremors are bound to happen. Dieter Riemenschneider commenting on her technique observes that it breaks up “the linear time sequence of the story and mingle and combines present, past and future, memories, dreams and allusive foresight as effortlessly as it shifts from one point of view to another” (“. . .In the Days” 128).
The text succeeds in “writing back to the empire” through the linguistic processes of appropriation and abrogation, as described by Ashcroft et al. Roy has freed herself from the shackles of traditional stiffness in the usage of English and has in the process created a new “english” to absorb the nuances of her region. Referring to her innovative use of language, Nancy Ellen Batty observes:

Through the use of free indirect discourse, occasional lapses into stream of consciousness narrative, and frequent recourse to word play, Roy manages to capture the immediacy of perception from a child’s point of view, using its juxtaposition against the impoverished and often cynical interior lives of the adults to condemn the latter’s self-interested actions. (334)

The language of the text highlights the rich overpowering regional element. On examining the concept of regionalism in this study, a closer look at her appropriation of the Malayalam language in Small Things is warranted. Aijaz Ahmad who has been critical of her ideology and political positioning vis-à-vis communism acclaims her as “the first Indian writer in English where a marvellous stylistic resource becomes available for provincial, vernacular culture without any effect of exoticism or estrangement, and without the book reading as a translation”(108). Through her interpolation of words from Malayalam, Roy ascertains that the intensity of the world she perceived remains intact. The rhyme on trains, one of the first
Lessons learnt in school (“Koo-koo kokum theevandi” [285]) and the vellam song (“Thaivy thaiy thaka thaiy thaiy thome”[211]) sung by the children are some of the favourites of Keralites. Similar to the Kathakali man’s association with the stories of Bhima, Duryodhana and Dushasana, Roy’s use of the language draws succour from the events of her own childhood and life:

To the Kathakali Man these stories are his children and his childhood. He has grown up with them. They are the house he was raised in, the meadows he played in. They are his windows of seeing. So when he tells a story, he handles it as he would a child of his own. He teases it. He punishes it. He sends it up like a bubble. He wrestles it to the ground and lets it go again. He laughs at it because he loves it. He can fly you across whole worlds in minutes, he can stop for hours to examine a wilting leaf. . . .He can reveal the nugget of sorrow that happiness contains. The hidden fish of shame in a seal of glory. (229-30)

Roy’s style of toying with the language and the perception of her region, the world and the universe is all contained in the above quote.

The essence of her Ayemenem is captured through the graphic descriptions of the weather, the Meenachal river, the flora and fauna, the kathakali performances and its people. The local colour is further established through Adoor Basi, the ace comedian of Malayalam movies of yesteryears (143), the song from the
popular Malayalam movie, _Chemmeen_ (219-20) and the folk song sung by Kuttappen (206). mittam(295), chenda(192), Akkara(196), ‘Aiyyo paavam’(131), ickilee(177) are among the numerous words used from the vernacular.

The untranslated expressions in the text begin from the very kinship terms associated with the names of the characters as addressed in the Kottayam region among Christian families—Baby Kochamma, Pappachi, Mammachi, Ammachi, Esthappen and Sophie Mol. Names of food items like “chakka vilachethu”(138), “idi appams for breakfast, kanji and meen for lunch”(210) “avalose undas”(273); items of clothing and ornaments(14) appear in the text as unitalicised whereas terms like _veshya_ used by the Inspector on account of Ammu’s connections with the untouchable have been italicised.

Belonging to avowed Anglophile family, the use of English authenticates their aversion for the mother tongue. Chacko insists on speaking in English at home but resorts to Malayalam when he thanks the protestor in the rally for shutting the car’s bonnet at the level crossing in Cochin (“‘Thanks, _keto!’...'Valarey thanks!’”[70]). Mammachi addresses the servant as “‘_Kando Kochu Mariye’” (178) and Baby Kochamma uses “meeshas” in Malayalam in connection with Inspector Thomas Mathew. This stresses not only the deviance from standard English but also makes clear the power relations imbricated within the society. Under Chacko’s influence, the twins seem to enjoy speaking English, though in private they speak their native language Malayalam. They are punished to write “‘impositions’– _I will always speak in English_” a hundred times each
by Baby Kochamma for the sin committed (36). The use of English, through its very utterance, was an indication of the supremacy of the white civilisation against the vernacular. Their naughty behaviour of reading English backwards signifies the rebellion of the colonised against the coloniser. This recalls Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, mentioned earlier, which simultaneously discloses the ambivalence of the colonial discourse as well as disrupts it. This obsequiousness to English, in a sense, recycles a similar history of the colonialist enterprise. Hence in the novel, Pappachi and his sister, Baby Kochamma are akin to the coloniser imposing new regimes on the women and children of the family.

Vernacular speech is mainly resorted to by the characters who do not belong to the Ipe family as also those of the lower strata of Ayemenem society. Cynthia Van den Driesen considers Roy’s use of untranslated words as “perhaps the most arresting mode of appropriation” which forces “the reader of the master text to negotiate this encounter with the opposed cultural identity of the racial Other” (369). The critic further points out that by reverting to the vernacular it “serves as a mode of reinforcing a sense of special intimacy, even a collusion between speaker and person addressed.” Comrade K.N.M. Pillai who converses to Chacko in stilted idiomatic English switches to Malayalam when he discusses the role of Velutha as a communist and the undue privileges he obtains at the pickle factory (“Oru kariyam parayattey”[277] or when affectionately addressing his wife as “‘Allay edi, Kalyani?’” [278]). Other such expressions are used by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man(101), Murlidharan at the level
crossing(64), the workers of the pickle factory(171), Kochu Maria (179, 185) and Kuttappen(206). This moulding of a new hybrid vocabulary assists the overall framework of the novel in staging a protest against the marginalising of local cultures. U.R. Ananthamurthy considers that the best effects of Roy’s language “lie in her great ability to mimic the Syrian Christian Malayalam” (132). The Kottayam dialect of Malayalam is brought into the dialogue to create a sociolinguistic authenticity (Small Things 128). An imitation of the Malayalee speaker’s English accent is created in the rendering of Sir Walter Scott’s poem, “Lochinvar”(271-72) and Mark Antony’s speech from Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar: “I cometober Caesar, not to praise him./ Theevil that mendoo lives after them/ The goodisoft interred with their bones;”(274-75). Other such indigenised pronunciation of English words are found in Amayrica (129), Die-vorced (130) one mint(134) and stoo (210). Priyamvada Gopal notes that “a bilingual sensibility where English is not taken for granted as a first language opens up literary possibilities in this novel, which is constantly aware of the joys and pitfalls of language acquisition” (154). This is illustrated in the following dialogue:

‘Thang God,’ Estha said.
‘Thank God, Estha,’ Baby Kochamma corrected him. . . .

Their Prer NUN sea ayshun was perfect. (154)

At times, words from the vernacular have their English equivalents juxtaposed for the sake of better comprehensibility (Emperors of the Realm of Taste as a literal translation for Ruchi lokathinde
Rajavu(46)). Critics like Vanajam Ravindran who have applauded Roy’s ability to craft “words and phrases with panache” (100) have pointed a few flaws in Roy’s use of Malayalam words. Modalali has been explained for the reader as landlord and Kochu Thomban used instead of Kochu Komban (102). Kombu meaning “tusk” in Malayalam, the tusker should have been named as Kochu Komban. The Malayalam words sprinkled throughout Small Things seamlessly blends together with the narrative to evoke the ambience of the region. Rarely does one feel it as a self-conscious attempt to lend local colour. Roy disperses Malayalam words in her text which allows her to “inscribe locality and difference” in her text (Mullaney 65). The interesting feature to be noted here is that Roy’s striking use of the language attempts to not only make aware the metonymic gap that exists between the indigenous culture and the colonialist on the other but also reflects a world located in its own difference of experience. As Ashcroft notes, this use of the language can be attributed to a writer’s creativity or “the sign of an ethnographic function by which the ‘truth’ of culture is inserted into the text by a process of metaphoric embodiment” (Post-Colonial 76).

Roy’s linguistic strategies function as a tool of resistance to the West not just by appropriation but by endowing a new legitimacy to this hybrid form. Recognising her innate ability to sport with the language, Kamala Das observes that “Arundhati uses English as a plaything” (qtd in Ghose 125). Roy’s text tears apart standard English as she subverts the traditional rules of grammar and syntax, discards standard punctuation, invents
neologisms (vomity [107], outdoorsy [13], stoppited [141]), telescopes words (“furrywhirring”, “sariflapping”, “whatisit?”[6]), splits them apart (“Bar Nowl”[193], “Mo-stunfortunate”[130]) and reads them backwards (“NAIDNI YUB, NAIDI EB”[58], “’nataS in their seye’”[60]). Commenting on her verbal wizardry and exuberance, Jaydeep Sarangi states that she “re-pidgins” (Indian) English through her stylistic experimentations (151). Rushdie’s penchant for framing compound words has found a “feisty contender” in Roy (Anjali Roy “Making”79), few of which are “viable die-able age” (3) “kind-schoolteacher-voice” (146), “dinner-plate-eyed” (308). She also uses literary strategies such as repetition (of lines and instances) thereby suggesting that each instance can be metonymically extended to the larger social world. Commenting on the structure of her book, the architect in Roy says in an interview to Taisha Abraham:

To me the architecture of the book is something that I worked very hard at. It really was like designing a building . . . the use of time, the repetition of words and ideas and feelings. It was really a search for coherence—design coherence — in the way that every last detail of a building — its doors and windows, its structural components—have, or at least ought to have, an aesthetic, stylistic integrity, a clear indication that they belong to each other, as must a book. I didn’t just write my book. I designed it. (90-91)

As in ethnographic narratives mentioned in the case of Pepper, Roy’s novel too abounds in the delightful use of sight, sound, smell,
taste and touch. She revels in capturing the colourful exuberance permeating through the landscape (1, 79, 173). I. Shanmughadas affirms that the sense of smell has been used to a telling effect by the novelist (132). The smells of the pickle factory, of the “new” river, of the Paravan and the smell of the river on Velutha’s body are a noteworthy few. Innumerable descriptions of sound (6, 65, 319) taste (79, 211) and tactile sensations (179, 285, 335) also feature in the novel.

Roy presents contemporary India as a multilingual society in which Indian English operates as just one of its languages. In his essay “Imagining India in English”, Murari Prasad traces her art of unique phrasing and rhythm to the early Indian English writer G.V. Desani (All about H. Hatter [1948]) as well as Salman Rushdie. But Prasad argues that she goes well beyond them in her “multi-level linguistic manipulation” (128). Comparing the two, Aijaz Ahmad claims that unlike Rushdie, Roy writes of the vernacular culture with an assuredness and is “deeply committed to Realism to take flight into magic Realism” (108). He applauds the naturalness in which Roy uses English and adds that “the novel is actually felt in English.” This would exonerate Roy from C.D. Narasimhaiah’s charge that she has only a mere “feeling for words” (15) and not into them as she fails to realise that “words are meant to mediate experience while she is busy peddling them” (“Makers” 17).

Roy observes that a writer “spends a lifetime journeying into the heart of the language, trying to minimize, if not eliminate, the distance between language and thought” (“Power Politics” 152). “Language”, she says “is the skin on my thought” (T. Abraham 91).
In *Small Things*, she “wrenches the English language from its cultural roots” by using “collaged words, regional aphorisms, and culturally eclipsed meanings” to create, as Taisha Abraham terms it “her own ‘Locusts Stand I’” (89).

The novel’s preoccupation with the issues of social relevance is presented by Roy through her natural and spontaneous wit which supersedes all traces of sentimentality. Resorting to many of the conventional devices such as irony, exaggeration and sarcasm, she assaults the lopsided values of the male dominated society. Roy’s prowess at characterisation and “her genius for individuating detail” stems from her close acquaintance with the community (Ahmad,”Reading”108). This is evident in her caricature of Kochu Maria. She sports a head too large for her body like “a bottled foetus that had escaped from its jar of formaldehyde in a Biology lab and unshrivelled and thickened with age” (170), a nose like a snout and fingers short and thick like cocktail sausages. Her earlobes have been “distended into weighted loops that swung around her neck” with earrings “sitting in them like gleeful children in a merry-go-(not all the way) round.” Roy continues her portrayal:

Though even in those days most Syrian Christian women had started wearing saris, Kochu Maria still wore her spotless half-sleeved white chatta with a V-neck and her white mundu, which folded into a crisp cloth fan on her behind. . . . .

She kept damp cash in her bodice which she tied tightly around her chest to flatten her unchristian
breasts. Her kunukku earrings were thick and gold. . . . Her right [ear] lobe had split open once and was sewn together again by Dr Verghese Verghese. Kochu Maria couldn’t stop wearing the kunukku because if she did, how would people know that despite her lowly cook’s job (seventy-five rupee a month) she was a Syrian Christian, Mar Thomite? Not a Pelaya, or a Pulaya, or a Paravan. (170)

*Small Things* has been applauded for its fresh innovative language, its narrative energy and its willingness to raise questions that are socially relevant. P. P. Raveendran suggests that these very same traits along with its strange and exotic theme make India an “excellent saleable material” for the European literary market (*Texts* 96). The veteran critic and writer, Sukumar Azhikode remarks that the book is replete with sights for the foreign reader as she hovers on the periphery and fails to delve into the region’s intricacies (qtd in Krishnan 2). In his editorial entitled “The Booker Prize: A Curse to Creativity”, Narasimhaiah’s finding fault with her locale as a fanciful picture with only a remote resemblance to Kerala (iv) is overly presumptuous. The critic accuses Roy for creating an effect not through her keen observation but by the manipulation of words whereby the place becomes “any place, with her seeking in vain to invest airy nothing with a local habitation and a name” (v). O.V. Vijayan supporting Roy, claims that the novel lacks any parading, and hence she cannot be blamed if the Westerners are allured to her writing. The Malayalam novelist and short story writer, Paul Zacharia affirms
that she has far more endearingly presented their little village of Ayemenem and the stream which is no celebrity river like the Pamba or the Periyar (Padmanabhan 107). Indira Nithyanandam affirms that the novel is born in the soil of Kerala and is incapable of taking root elsewhere (179).

A study of the novel leaves no doubt about the specificity of the locale. As Roy confesses—“I wanted to drive my stake in here [in Kerala]. I wanted to say that this is my place, that it deserves literature. It was very important to me that it be real, these stars, these leaves”(Mullaney 28). The novelist as an insider describing her community draws a good deal of autobiographical matter from her life and that of her family. In his article “Ayemenem Country” Vinu Abraham points out that “Arundhati Roy has borrowed brick and timber from two old buildings in the village – Pulliyampullil House and Shanthi House – to construct her Ayemenem House”(42). Rahel who shares Roy’s regional and religious background is undoubtedly Arundhati and her mother, brother and uncle bear resemblances to Ammu, Estha and Chacko in the novel. Even the character of Kari Sapu, the cigar-smoking gay planter is a grand uncle and the legend of his “sickled” ghost haunting the estate seems to be drawn from Roy’s life at Ayemenem (M.Roy 26). The novel is soundly rooted in Ayemenem, though as Roy states in the copyright page of the book that “liberties have been taken with the location of rivers, level crossings, churches and crematoria.” Though Roy deals specifically with the Syrian Christian community, their myths and rituals are sparingly dealt with, save for a description of the funeral ceremony of Sophie Mol
at the Ayemenem church (4-5). Through *Small Things*, Roy has achieved her objective of creating her fictional world to address issues encompassing a greater significance. The need to preserve one’s identity and culture to resist the hegemony of globalization remains the most pressing concerns confronting the regions.