Great World Texts: Teaching *The God of Small Things* in Wisconsin, Center for the Humanities, University of Wisconsin-Madison

By Aparna Dharwadker, University of Wisconsin-Madison

**Glossary of Terms**

**Abhilash Talkies.** The cinema theatre in Cochin where Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man while his family is watching *The Sound of Music*. After the arrival of talking films, the theatres that screened them came to be called “Talkies” in India.

**Alleppey.** An important coastal city in Kerala about thirty miles from Aymanam, famous for its beaches and backwaters. Ammu dies in a boarding house in this city.

**Ayemenem.** An actual small town in Kerala, spelled "Aymanam." The family of Arundhati Roy’s mother, Mary Roy, was settled there, and owned a pickle factory. The novelist spent a significant portion of her childhood in Aymanam, and it is the main setting for *The God of Small Things*.

**Bhima and Dushasana.** In the Sanskrit Epic *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is the wife of the five Pandava brothers Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva. Yudhishthira bets her in a game of dice, and loses her to his cousins and arch-rivals, the Kauravas. Dushasana (a Kaurava prince) insults her in open court by trying to strip her naked, but her virtue is protected by Lord Krishna, and she vows that her hair will remain loose until it is bathed in Dushasana’s blood. Bhima, the most valiant and hot-tempered of the Pandava brothers, undertakes to fulfil Draupadi’s vow by killing both Dushasana and his older brother Duryodhana, and succeeds in his quest on the final day of the Mahabharata war. This narrative is the subject of *Duryodhana Vadham*, the second Kathakali performance Rahel and Estha watch in Chapter 12. See also **Karna and Kunti**.

**Caste.** The basis of hierarchical organization in orthodox Hindu society. In this fourfold structure, Brahmans appear at the top as priests and scholars; Kshatriyas are the warriors and kings; Vaishyas are merchants; and Shudras are artisans and laborers. Untouchables are “polluted” communities that exist outside the caste divisions. See “Untouchables,” below.

**Cochin.** A historic port city in Kerala, which also hosts the region's major airport. This is where Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol arrive from England, and are greeted by Chacko and their other relatives. Cochin is vital to the history of trade and colonialism on India’s west coast, and also an important point of entry for diasporic communities such as the Syrian Christians and the Cochin Jews. For more information, see “Background and Contexts.”

**Communist.** A follower of the system of political beliefs introduced in Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* (1848), and later developed by twentieth-century revolutionary leaders such as Lenin and Mao. For a more detailed discussion of the influence of Communism in Kerala, see “Background and Contexts.” In the novel, Comrade K. N. M. Pillai is the local Communist leader, Velutha is a card-carrying member, and Chacko is a sympathizer despite his capitalist ownership of a factory.

**Communist Party of India.** This party was founded in 1920, and its principles influenced literature and the arts deeply from the 1930s to the 1950s. In 1964 it split into the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India–Marxist(CPM), and in 1971 a third major
branch, the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CP-ML) was established. Kerala and West Bengal are the two states in India that have had multiple communist governments since the 1960s. For more information see “Background and Contexts.”

**Comrade.** The term by which one member of the Communist party addresses another.

**Coolie.** In Asia, a pejorative term for a skilled or unskilled laborer.

**Grotesque, the.** A style of literature and/or art in which things are distorted and made bizarre. It can incorporate the supernatural, violence, the unmentionable, and sexuality.

**Gulf-money.** Since the 1970s, a large number of people from Kerala have gone to the oil-rich countries of the Persian Gulf as skilled laborers and professionals to increase their earnings dramatically. The shifts in residence are temporary, and meant purely for material gain.

**History House.** The abandoned home of Kari Saipu, the “Black Sahib,” which lies across the river, close to the hut where Velutha lives with Vellya Paapen and Kuttappen. Estha and Rahel become obsessed with this site and use the overgrown area surrounding it as their refuge from Ayemenem House. They run away to the History House after Ammu calls them the millstones around her neck; it is also where Amma and Velutha have their trysts, and the sleeping Velutha is captured and beaten by the police. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem as an adult, the house has become the Heart of Darkness, because it has been converted into a bland hotel catering to the tastes of cultural tourists.

**Kathakali.** A traditional art form native to Kerala, which combines narrative, dance, and "full-body acting." In Chapter 12, Rahel and Estha watch an authentic Kathakali performance at the Ayemenem temple, spurred by the actors’ desire for redemption after they have prostituted their art before tourists. Kathakali performances are traditionally several hours long, but have been drastically abridged to cater to the short attention span and consumerism of foreigners. For more information, see “Background and Contexts.”

**Kari Saipu.** This name, which in Malayalam means “Black Sahib,” is given to the colonial Englishman who “goes native,” like the character Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and stays on in Ayemenem after Indian independence, only to commit suicide in 1959. According to the local lore, the ghost of Kari Saipu haunts the surroundings of his home, the History House, and solicits passers-by for a cigar.

**Karna and Kunti.** In the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*, Karna is Kunti’s oldest son by the Sun God, but she abandons him soon after birth because she is still unmarried. After marrying king Pandu, Kunti bears five more sons, the Pandava brothers Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva. The great eighteen-day war in the epic is fought between the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas, who have given Karna shelter and earned his loyalty. On the eve of the war, Kunti reveals to Karna that she is his mother, and asks him to promise that he will not harm his younger brothers. He promises to spare everyone except Arjuna, the great archer, but later dies at Arjuna’s hands on the battlefield, in part because of the promise his mother had extracted. The meeting between Kunti and Karna is the subject of *Karna Shabadam* (Karna’s Oath or Karna’s Words), the Kathakali performance that Rahel and Estha watch in Chapter 12. See also *Bhima and Dushasana.*

**Kodam puli tree.** A tree belonging to the species garcinia cambogea (and usually spelt “Kudampuli” in Malayalam) that bears pumpkin-shaped, sour-tasting fruit. The fruit has
digestive properties, and is used regularly in Kerala cuisine.

**Kottayam.** The town in Kerala that is geographically closest to Aymanam. Inspector Thomas Mathew belongs to the Kottayam police force, and it is at his station that Velutha dies of his injuries.

**Mar Thoma Church.** A Syrian Christian denomination in Kerala that traces its lineage back to St Thomas the Apostle, who is said to have arrived in this region and carried out the first conversions in 52 ACE.

**Mol and Mon.** Terms of affection in Kerala for a little girl and a little boy.

**Mundu.** The white cotton garment worn traditionally by men and certain categories of women in southern India, particularly in Kerala. It is tied at the waist and normally reaches the ankles, but peasants and workers of all kinds hoist it up to knee-length for ease of movement.

**Namboodiripad, E. M. S (1909-1998).** The most important Communist leader in post-independence Kerala, known popularly as “Kerala’s Mao Tse Tung.” In 1957 he became the Chief Minister of the first democratically elected Communist government in India (and the second in the world), and held the position twice---from 1957 to 1959, and from 1967 to 1969. He was also the leader of the opposition in the State Legislature from 1960-64, and 1970-77. *The God of Small Things* was published the year before Namboodiripad’s death, and he dismissed it as “bourgeois decadence,“

**Naxalites.** Followers of the Maoist political philosophy that led to an armed peasant uprising in the village of Naxalbari, in the state of West Bengal, in May 1967. The demand underlying the revolt was that land belongs to the tillers, not absentee landlords, and over four decades organized peasant resistance of this kind has gained strength in other parts of India, including Kerala.

**Parashuram.** The name of the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the god who is the “preserver” of creation in the Hindu trinity (the other two gods are Brahma the creator and Shiva the destroyer). According to myth, Parashuram was the “warrior-saint” who held back the waters on the western coast of India, and thus preserved the Malabar coast in Kerala.

**Paravan.** An Untouchable caste, usually of fishermen and tree-climbers. Velutha and his family are the principal Paravans in the novel, condemned to their Untouchable status by heredity.

**Shillong.** A city in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, where the twins Estha and Rahel are born in November 1962.

**Untouchables.** Members of “impure” communities at the bottom of the caste hierarchy in orthodox Hindu society, whose touch is “polluting” because they perform unclean tasks such as tanning, the cremation of dead bodies, and the disposal of night soil. In creating Velutha, the novel’s main Untouchable character, Roy appears to incorporate the Western meaning of "untouchable" as someone superior or irreproachable, and offers a moving portrait of a lovable, intelligent man doomed by the forces of history.