Unit 1: Background and Context

The World of Arundhati Roy and *The God of Small Things*

By Sarah Harrison

**Objective:**
Provide background and context for the study of *The God of Small Things*, and introduce students to the distinctive role of fiction in helping readers to understand actual events and experiences.

**Required Preparatory Reading:**
- “Introduction and Overview” by Vinay Dharwadker

**Additional Readings and Resources:**
- See list of web resources in “Introduction and Overview” by Vinay Dharwadker
- A useful introduction to the history of the Kerala coast: http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/1.html

**Handouts/Presentation Materials:**
- Maps (see handouts online at http://humanities.wisc.edu/public-projects/gwt/2012-2013-project/teaching-resources1/)
- What is “Close Reading”?

**Lecture Points:**
- Using the preparatory materials, the lecture should contextualize the novel by providing a brief history of India, drawing especial attention to key events from the colonial period to the present-day:
  - 1757: The British East India Company establishes its capital at Calcutta.
  - 1857: Indians wage their first “war of independence” against the Company in what was described by colonial historians as the “Great Mutiny.” This conflict results in dissolution of the Company and the British Crown and Parliament taking over direct rule of India.
  - 1885: The Indian National Congress launches a peaceful political movement for independence from Britain, which culminated in the “freedom movement” led by Mahatma Gandhi.
  - 1947: India declares independence, becoming the first British colony to separate from the Crown
- Using the maps provided, locate India and describe its main physical features
- Identify and describe the main settings of the novel (Kerala, Aymanam/Ayemenem, Kottayam, Cochin/Kochi)
- Discuss the people, politics, religions, and languages of present-day India, making reference to any current events that are relevant to your course
- Discuss why context is important to understanding the novel
- Discuss the novel’s blending of fact and fiction, introducing the concept of the “semi-
“autobiographical” text
  o  This is a good moment to address the literary analysis skills you will use in this classroom, e.g. close reading (see handout), thematic analysis. Remind your students that, although there are factual elements in the novel, this is still a work of fiction not a documentary.

• Discuss how literature can help us to understand reality by: casting well-known events in a new light; exposing marginalized and/or multiple perspectives; suggesting alternative versions of history; imagining possible future outcomes of present circumstances

Discussion Questions:
  • What does “factual” mean? What is an autobiography? What is fiction? What do you expect from fictional writing? Why do you read fiction? What is unique about literature?
    o  Invite students to think, for example, about the ways in which literature offers unique opportunities to imagine under-represented or marginalized viewpoints; to personalize large-scale histories and political events; to shed light on how individuals (might have) felt about different events.
  • Compare contemporary, colonial, and pre-colonial maps of India. Discuss their features.
  • Find Aymanam and Kottayam on the map and discuss their features. Do they remind the students of anywhere closer to home?
  • Ask any students who have visited India to describe their impressions and experiences.

Assignment and Project Ideas:
  • See the suggested activities in the “Introduction and Overview” by Vinay Dharwadker.
  • Now is a good time to ask your students to keep a reflection journal in which they respond to the text and material covered in class. You might ask them to write 1-2 pages of personal response to the text, to find points of identification, or to highlight confusing or problematic passages. Or you could use the discussion questions in these lesson plans to create your own guided journal – a handout of prompts to which you require the students to respond when reading the novel. This could be an on-going project, a group activity, or an in-class writing assignment at the end of each class period.
  • Ask students to write a short reflective essay on the differences between and/or uses of “fact” and “fiction”.

Teaching The God of Small Things in Wisconsin  http://humanities.wisc.edu/public-projects/gwt/2012-2013-project/
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