When *The God of Small Things* was first published in 1997, having taken more than four years to write, the novel met with a glowing critical reaction, which Roy has described as “a fabulous circus” (GST “Reader’s Guide,” 325). Chief among its plaudits was the 1997 Man Booker Prize for Fiction, a highly prestigious annual literary award given to “the best novel of the year written by a citizen of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland.” This prize offers a useful starting point for thinking about how to “place” *The God of Small Things*, which is at once an Indian novel, an English novel, and a “postcolonial” novel.

While Roy sets her novel in a precisely described Indian location—the town of Ayemenem in which she grew up—she writes in English, a language which was brought to India by British colonists during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Addressing the impact and legacies of the British Raj (“Reign”) is a primary concern of the novel. In this respect, it is characteristic of much of what is called “postcolonial” literature—broadly speaking, writing that came after colonialism formally ended—which commonly seeks to critique the social, cultural, and political impositions of foreign colonialism, often using the colonisers’ language to do so.

**Objective:**
Explain how the novel can be “placed” within different literary traditions (Indian, English, postcolonial), and provide overview of its critical and commercial reception.

**Required Preparatory Reading:**
- Biography of Arundhati Roy
  [http://www.haverford.edu/engl/engl277b/Contexts/Arundhati_Roy.htm](http://www.haverford.edu/engl/engl277b/Contexts/Arundhati_Roy.htm)
- “Arundhati Roy and Indian Fiction in English: An Overview” by Aparna Dharwadker
- “A Conversation with Arundhati Roy” (p.325-330 in the Random House trade paperback edition provided to participating teachers)

**Additional Readings and Resources:**
- “A Silver Thimble in Her Fist,” a book review by Alice Truax
  [http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/25/reviews/970525.25truaxt.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/25/reviews/970525.25truaxt.html)
- “The Age of Innocence,” a book review by Ritu Menon
- “The Novel’s Reception” by Julie Mullaney in *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things* (68-76)
• Information on the Man Booker Prize, including a list of past winners: http://www.themanbookerprize.com/

Handouts/Presentation Materials:
• Notes on Characters
• Glossary
• What is Postcolonial Literature?

Lecture Points:
• Provide background information about Roy and *The God of Small Things*, emphasizing the different ways in which this novel can be “placed”
  o *An Indian novel*: Written by an Indian author who now lives in Delhi, set in an real Indian village, featuring allusions to real-life Indian history and politics, *TGST* is in many ways an Indian novel. Roy additionally describes Indian cultural traditions (e.g. Kathakali). This is a good moment to consider how literary works do more than summarizing reality. In representing an imagined version of Indian reality, Roy emphasizes select facets of Indian existence (e.g. the lasting social and psychological influences of British colonialism). This novel might provide us with some insights into Indian culture, but it is not a documentary, as will become increasingly clear in subsequent units, which address its distinctive form and content.
  o *An English novel*: Written in English, featuring allusions to many works of English literature (see handout), and much praised by English literary critics, *TGST* is “English” in several senses.
  o *A Postcolonial novel*: Thinking about *TGST* as a postcolonial novel calls particular attention to the ways in which Roy responds to and critiques the attitudes and practices of British colonialism. To categorize the novel in this way is to emphasize its political intent, which a) asserts the richness of Indian indigenous cultures, b) re-tells Indian history from the perspective of those colonized, and c) restores the connection between Indians and their natural and built environments from which they were alienated during colonialism.
  o *A World novel*: Note that the above “placings” of the novel are not mutually exclusive; *TGST* is all of these at once, and more. Make students aware that Roy is working within and across multiple literary traditions, which enrich her writing in different ways. In this respect, *TGST* is a “world” novel, which has a resonance and a readership beyond its immediate historical, geographical, and linguistic contexts.

• Drawing on the preparatory readings, provide a more detailed overview of Indian fiction in English, and the novel’s relation to this tradition
• Using the handout provided, explain the key characteristics and concerns of postcolonial literature
• Drawing on the suggested reviews of the novel, provide an overview of the critical reaction to and commercial success of *TGST*
- Western reception: Generally positive, as indicated by its Booker Prize Award; critics frequently compare Roy to Salman Rushdie, another internationally bestselling Indian author who writes novels in English.
- Indian reception: Mixed with some public figures taking especial offense to Roy’s portrayal of sexual intimacy and her critique of Indian political leadership and religion; Sabu Thomas, a Syrian Christian lawyer in her home state of Kerala where the novel is set takes Roy to court on charges of obscenity.

- Set guidelines for how you will read the novel in your class. The novel’s intense and varied reception suggests that it is being read in different ways by readers with varied priorities and interpretive biases. What strategies will you use to ensure a careful and fair reading of Roy’s work? (e.g. close reading, studying historical background, writing frequent reflections, discussing different reactions in class, etc.)

**Discussion Questions:**

- *The God of Small Things* will be the first time many of you have read a novel set in India and/or by an Indian writer. What do you already know about India? What are some other ways in which we learn about Indian culture? What does the novel tell us about India? What does it *not* tell us? Is it possible for a literary work to represent an entire nation?
- Why do you think this has been such a popular text that appeals to readers around the world, even 15 years after its first publication? Why do you think that Roy herself has been uneasy about the novel’s commercial success?
- Discuss the different ways in which the novel can be “placed.” Why does it make a difference if we call this an “Indian,” an “English” or a “postcolonial” novel? How else could we describe it? Can it be “placed” elsewhere? What do we gain/lose in our reading of the text by “placing” it in these different ways?
- As a postcolonial text, *The God of Small Things* resists the attitudes and ideas which underpinned British colonization of India. What was the impact of colonialism on India? How did it affect Indians’ view of themselves and their own culture?
- How can writing be used as a tool of “resistance”? What makes it effective and/or ineffective?

**Assignment and Project Ideas:**

- After discussing the Booker Prize in class, ask students to imagine that they’re on the selection committee for a “Great World Text” award. What criteria would they use to choose a winner? What are the qualities they look for in “great” literature? Can they draw up a shortlist based on their own reading?

**Suggestions for expanding this unit:**

The British Raj is a formative context for *The God of Small Things*. Explore British colonialism in more depth with your students to give them a historical background for the structures, systems, and stereotypes that Roy is responding to. Read and analyze a selection of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education” to give students a sense of colonial
attitudes towards Indians. How would students feel if they suddenly had to start receiving education in an unfamiliar language?