Unit 5: Language and Style: Eccentricities of Expression

By Tracy Lemaster

Roy’s critical acclaim consistently praises the originality and inventiveness of *The God of Small Things’s* language and style. Author John Updike states of *The God of Small Things*: “A novel of real ambition must invent its own language, and this one does.” In the context of Roy’s nomination for the Booker prize, one critic notes that “[a]lmost alone among the 106 entries Roy has her own voice, her own signature.” Similarly, Amar Prasad, in his book on Arundhati Roy, writes, “She has the credit to invent a new style.” *The God of Small Things* offers a variety of unconventional formal elements that comprise its critically revered language and style.

Roy repeatedly breaks the standard rules of spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation. She reworks capitalizations, coins neologisms, employs phonetics, imports typographical devices, inserts lists, catalogues, and numerations, and scatters the novel with anagrams, puns, and palindromes. She exchanges syllables between words, reads words backwards, splits them apart, and creates new words in the process. In addition to language experimentation, the novel’s narration is in the third person yet fluidly adopts the children’s thoughts and images. This shapes a singular narrative voice that is a hybrid combination of the two children’s psychologies. Furthermore, within the context of an interconnected extended family, Roy also offers an intergenerational narrative voice of different viewpoints that is transhistorical. Finally, another major stylistic element of *The God of Small Things* is the novel’s intertextuality. Roy’s novel names and engages classic literature throughout as well as a variety of high and popular cultural intertexts. Roy’s experimental language, style, and genre serve many theoretical ends. Her formal elements evoke complex theoretical issues such as Anglophone authorship, cultural hybridity, textual migration, and the child’s point-of-view, among others.

Objective: Provide an overview of unique formal elements in genre, style, and language in *The God Of Small Things*, and offer theoretical background for and effects of these eccentric expressions.

Preparatory Reading:

Additional Readings and Resources:

Great World Texts: A Program of the Center for the Humanities, University of Wisconsin-Madison
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“Radical Aesthetics: Arundhati Roy’s Ecology of Style” by Elisha Cohn. On-line article devoted entirely to Roy’s unconventional style.  

Two articles on intertextuality in Arundhati Roy; the first using Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, the second using E.M. Forster’s A Passage to India.
  

Handouts/Presentation Materials: “What is Intertextuality?”

Lecture Points:

**Genre**

- **Anglophone Authorship:** An Anglophone author is an author outside the US writing in English. TGST’s unconventional treatment of language represents Roy’s position as an Anglophone author. Roy’s devices for making language strange and those strategies of appropriation show the postcolonial Anglophone writer’s attempts to interrogate and remake the language of the colonizer. Raja Rao notes the difficulty of how the Indian writer “must convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.” Roy’s linguistic devices relay the tension, and paradoxically the creativity, of a hybridized Indian culture influenced by British and American hegemony.

- **Narrative Voice:** TGST’s narrator speaks in the third rather than first person. Yet the narrator incorporates thoughts and images attributed to Rahel and Estha. Taking up the children’s mental language, the narrator emphasizes their interaction and playfulness with the world and with language, as well as emphasizes the doubleness of the twins’ shared subjectivity. The God of Small Thing’s hybrid narrative voice that adopt’s Rahel and Estha’s points-of-view represents the psychological intimacy of the twins. Furthermore, this fluid narrative voice shows how, in Kerala, members of an inter-generational family maintain close ties with their extended family, creating a network of imbricated identities. The novel’s semi-autobiographical family saga represents an intergenerational storyline where the narrator enters and exits different psychologies and histories as portraying an intimately connected familial structure.

- **Child’s Point-of-View:** TGST is concerned with authentically representing a child’s point-of-view. Roy’s unconventional spelling, grammar, etc. represents Rahels and Estha’s points-of-view as they learn, question, and satirize the language and happenings of the adult world. The breaking of form and the consistent breaking of sentences and words demonstrate their deconstruction of language, speech, and social discourse.

**Style**
• **Nonstandard Spelling, Punctuation, and Capitalization:** Rahel and Estha love to speak English forwards, backwards, and in new combinations. The children split words, fracture sentence structures, and subvert linear arrangements, thereby showing their acquisition of and experimentation with language.

  o Examples:
    “Life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was Forever.”
    “He dismissed the whole business as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics.”
    “She enjoyed the WWF Wrestling Mania shows, with Hulk Hogan and Mr. Perfect.”
    “Cuff link Cuff-link.”
    “ehT serutnevda fo eisuS lerriuqS.”
    “Nictitating
    ictitating
    titating
    itating
    tating
    ating
    ting
    ing.”

• **Lists, Catalogues, and Number-Counting:** Roy’s novel is rich with both practical and literary lists. Her listing, cataloguing, and number counting challenge the common perception of simple itemization. Rather, her enumerative form conjures up images of the colonial past where the list-creating impulse plays into colonial rule and politics. Furthermore, her vertical, often hierarchical, lists can evoke the concept of the caste system itself.

  o Examples:
    "PICKLES                  SQUASHES                  JAMS
    Mango                  Orange                  Banana
    Green pepper           Grape                  Mixed fruit
    Bitter gourd           Pineapple              Grapefruit marmalade
    Garlic                 Mango
    Salted lime”
    “(1) Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes.
    (2) Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings.
    (3) Bright copper kettles.
    (4) Doorbells and sleighbells and schnitzel with noodles.
    (5) Etc.”

• **Intertextuality:** Intertextuality is a brief or prolonged reference to a literary or cultural “text” within a second text. TGST names and engages classic literature throughout including Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar*, Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Sir Walter Scott’s “Lochinvar,” to name a few. Additionally, high and popular cultural intertexts include *The Sound of Music*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Modern Times*, and *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Roy’s intertextuality
illustrates the ways in which literary and cultural texts travel across cultures as implicated in and part of a wider political system of exchange. Through intertextuality, Roy is able to expose and critique American cultural and economic power. She shows a resulting hybridized Indian culture where movement between global powers, like the East and West, result in transformed cultural “texts.”

Examples:
“Further inland, and still across, a five-star hotel chain had bought the Heart of Darkness.”
“It would make them truly sorry, like the grown-ups in Hamelin after the Pied Piper took away all their children.”

- Discuss with students how a novel’s style, as well as its content, conveys arguments. Explore the inseparability between style and storyline.
- Ask students why Roy would choose to be experimental with language, and how her unconventional language is linked to both the author’s identity (as an Anglophone postcolonial author) and her characters’ identities (as children, as members of an interconnected family culture, as under Indian political rule).
- Using the handout provided, introduce the concept of “intertextuality.” Discuss how Roy’s intertextual references engage historical British influence on India, contemporary American influence on India, India’s cultural hybridity, and globalization.

Discussion Questions:
- Did *TGST*’s nonstandard spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation make the text easier or harder to read? Do you feel the novel’s unconventional language and style gave the effect of an authentic child’s “voice”? Of an authentic girl’s experience? Of an intergenerational experience? Of a postcolonial experience? Why or why not?
- Can you name examples of American “intertexts” in the novel? When do you think Rahel and Estha are questioning, enjoying, or resisting an intertext? What examples of intertextuality do you think are political in the novel? How does the way Roy portrays a particular intertext show that she is making a political statement with it?
- Do some of Roy’s unconventional style choices remind you of other forms of communication or expression, such as contemporary digital media’s texting, shorthand, or net lingo?

Assignment and Project Ideas:
- Ask students to write a journal entry of the events in their day within the style of Roy’s writing.
- Have students choose a complex social topic, term, or phrase—perhaps one they grappled with as a child. Then have them artistically write the language of that topic, term, or phrase in a way that helps explain it. Suggest they adopt some of Rahel and Estha’s experimentation with language to present it, such as exchanging syllables between words, reading words backwards, splitting words apart, and creating new words from old ones.
- After discussing different forms of intertextuality, have students rewrite a classic story in American history using a different cultural intertext.