Unit 6: Love Relationships, Family Influence, and Gender Politics

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In *The God of Small Things*, Roy foregrounds how private love relationships are actually socially and politically regulated, as stated in her definition of “Love Laws” which “lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much.” Reversing the natural uncontrollability of who to love, in what way, and to what extent, results in equally unnatural subversions and occlusions of love relationships. Romantic, sexual, platonic, and familial love relationships in *The God of Small Things* become intermixed, perverted, and destroyed by social politics. These social politics include the novel’s primary foci of caste and religion, as well as politics working “underneath” the surface, such as gender. Importantly in the novel, social politics are often enforced by the family, even to their own detriment, and ultimately expose the reactionary violence of reciprocal state and family “policing” structures. Because the agent for these social politics is the family itself, we can trace these unnatural results through reworkings of love relationships within the family, and implicating the family.

Alongside the explicit influence that caste and religion play in dictating the personal relationships of the characters in *The God of Small Things*, gender is an implicit, though central, context. Gender plays an important role in family and social dynamics that regulate love relationships. Gender is an organizing social structure that dictates power relations within individuals’ private lives.

**Objective:** To examine how the family and state reciprocate the enforcement of social politics about love, and how love relationships can be subverted under these pressures. To focus on the category of gender as an integral element in the various intersections of family, “love,” and sex.

**Lecture Points:**
The central “love” relationship that disrupts social politics in *TGST* is the sexual and romantic attraction between an Untouchable toward an upper-caste Syrian Christian woman. This affair disrupts social politics about inter-caste and cross-religious mixing. This affair threatens these systems’ prominence in post-Independence India. To intervene, the communal family operates as agents of the state who manipulate real and contrived violence into political code. Ammu’s mother, Mammachi, learns of Ammu’s affair with Velutha from Velutha’s father. Baby Kochamma, the grand-aunt, rushes to the police station with a false rape charge that she legitimates by making Ammu’s children, Rahel and Estha, lie to the police. After strategic familial attempts to reestablish order, Ammu’s brother separates Ammu from Estha and banishes her, thus causing Ammu to die alone in poverty a few years later. Multiple love relationships are intermixed, perverted, and destroyed in the process of reinforcing “Love Laws.”

- **Romantic/Sexual Love:** Romantic love, sexual love, and desire are normally categories that seem distinct from familial love. Familial love relationships, including parent-to-child and sibling-to-sibling, lack a sexual component because they are platonic. However, when the family acts as agents of the state for enforcing social politics, these demarcations become intermingled.
The family regulates Ammu’s sexuality and sexual relations with Velutha.

- Estha and Rahel ultimately have an incestuous encounter.

- **Familial Love**: Love relationships between family members, traditionally based on care, support, and protection, can break down. In addition to the breaking down of familial love relationships, the family can literally divide.
  - Ammu and Baby Kochamma make Rahel and Estha lie to the police, a lie that damages the children emotionally and psychologically.
  - Ammu’s brother separates Ammu from Estha then banishes her, thus causing Ammu to die alone in poverty a few years later.

- **Future Love**: Roy shows how the destruction and subversion of current love relationships can thwart future love relationships.
  - Estha never marries and lives socially isolated.
  - Rahel never leaves home and feels a permanent emptiness that thwarts her one marriage.

The family privately polices religious and caste politics, shaping personal love relationships through political code. Operating within the more transparent politics of caste and religion is gender politics.

- **Gender Politics**: The parents contrive rape accusations to conceal and deny the woman’s taboo sexual attraction to the socially subjugated male. Such an attraction from a woman to a man of a lesser social strata threatens a stable definition of citizen and the circumscribed parameters of women’s political and sexual power. The regulation of women’s sexualities catalyzes the novel’s plots and receives equal judgment by the family and society. The family polices Ammu’s sexuality by reintegrating her transgressions into a criminal charge that can only be executed through the family’s internal violence. Thus, the woman’s plotline privatizes legal violence not simply through a false rape trial, but through the family’s operations as agents of the state.
  - After a period of berating Velutha, Ammu focuses her disgust on her daughter, redirecting sexual blame onto the woman.
  - The parents’ focus on the women’s sexual desire as point of contestation demonizes women’s sexuality and validates their physical and familial punishment.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Analyze the phrase “love laws.” Does Roy’s rhyming pair of words seem inherently contradictory in meaning? Why would Roy use the term “law”? Can social issues be policed by individuals? Does the family police “love” relationships as much as or more than actual law enforcement? Does the novel show that regulating who to love is ultimately successful? What are the unwritten “love laws” in *TGST*?

- How does the termination of Ammu and Velutha’s love relationship affect other love relationships in the novel? Give some examples of the overlapping or intermixing of family/platonic love relationships and romantic/sexual love relationships.

- Consider the proximity of the community, the family, and the individual in following quote where Mammachi imagines Ammu and Velutha’s affair: “She had defiled generations of breeding . . .
and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, forever 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.” Why does the family feel their social reputation will be effected by Ammu and Velutha’s affair? How does the structure of communal family support their intercession in each other’s private lives? How does an individual’s “love” choice implicate the family, which therefore implicates the community? Is there any separation between public and private?

- Why does Mammachi dismiss her son’s sexual liaisons as “Men’s Needs,” but she does not tolerate her daughter’s love affair? How does gender, or the “double standard,” operate in the family’s response to Ammu’s affair with Velutha? Is the destabilization of caste and religious mores the only reasons for their rejection of this love relationship, or is gender a factor? Is caste and gender even the primary reasons?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Have students draw a chart of the various “love” relationships in the novel, and how each is reshaped during and after the termination of Ammu and Velutha’s affair. How are traditional paradigms of family love and romantic love reshaped by the trauma of Velutha’s death and Ammu’s persecution?

- Close read some of the novel’s key scenes looking for how gender politics are working. Then consider how gender intersects with other social structures that dictate power relations within individuals’ lives, such as caste and religion.

Suggestions for Expanding this Unit:

- Students can further interrogate how gender works in the context of TGST by looking at how critical reception of Arundhati Roy as an author contained elements of gender politics. For example, critics often focused on describing her “attractive” appearance, and attributed her talents to influence by male authors, even though she only cites a few female authors as influences. How are some of the novel’s gender politics regarding women’s power, choices, sexuality, social status, and appearance, rearticulated through Roy’s reception as a novelist?