Unit 7: Political and Social Structures – Communism, Caste, Religion

By Sarah Harrison

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy repeatedly demonstrates that “the personal is political.” Her characters’ public lives and private lives are mediated by intersecting social, political, and religious structures that profoundly affect their behavior within and outside their homes, their relationships to other people, the jobs they perform, and their perceptions of the world.

Critics such as Aijaz Ahmad have argued that Roy’s portrayal of the Communist Party of India is “spiteful.” However, her depiction of the Syrian Christian community to which the Ipe family belongs is also highly critical of their assumed social superiority. Similarly, Roman Catholicism does not escape satire, as we see in Roy’s tragicomic depiction of Baby Kochamma’s unrequited passion for Father Mulligan (23-26; 280-83). Although Velutha is portrayed with considerable sympathy by Roy, she does not idealize “Untouchables” in the novel. Velutha’s own father, for example, finds it impossible to deny the social hierarchy in which he has grown up, betraying his own son when his illicit relationship with Ammu is discovered (242).

In teaching students about these “big things” which affect the “small things” in the characters’ lives, it is important to emphasize the complex relationships between these formative contexts. Communism, caste, or religion alone cannot explain how and why her characters act. Over time, these structures and beliefs have changed, overlapped, and reinforced one another.

**Objective:** Provide students with an overview of the overlapping social, political, and religious contexts for *The God of Small Things*, drawing attention to the ways in which these structures both reinforce and contradict one another.

**Preparatory Reading:**
- “Introduction and Overview” by Vinay Dharwadker
- “Untouchables in *The God of Small Things*”:
  [http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/roy/alum1.html](http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/roy/alum1.html)

**Additional Readings and Resources:**
- “Caste and *The God of Small Things*”: [http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/caste.html](http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/caste.html)

**Handouts/Presentation Materials:**
- “The Caste System in India”

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Lecture Points:

- Using the materials above, provide an overview of the intersecting social and political structures which Roy critiques in *TGST*:
  - *The Caste System*: A traditional Hindu form of social organization which divides people into hierarchical groups. The caste someone is born into determines what occupation they perform, the kind of education they receive (if any), how they might dress, what they eat, and how they interact with others. Velutha belongs to a large group of “outcasts” known as “Untouchables” who are deemed “impure” through their occupational contact with filth, dirt, bodily fluids, etc. Outlawed in the 1950 Constitution, caste prejudice still lingers in modern-day India (cf. handout).
  - *Syrian Christians*: The Ipe family belong to this group, who trace their origins to the “high caste” Hindus believed to have been converted by St. Thomas the Apostle early in the 1st century AD when he is said to have visited Kerala. They are one of India’s smallest religious minorities. Although Christian, they follow many Hindu social customs. They are affluent and highly educated, asserting a high social status based on their claimed “upper-caste” Brahmin ancestry.
  - *Communism*: The Communist Party of India (CPI) formed in 1920 as the political party of the Indian working class. In the 1950s and 1960s, two distinct “factions,” called the Communist Party (Marxist) [the CP(M)] and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) [the CP(ML)] broke away from the older CPI. Much of *TGST* is set in 1969 when the CP(M) led by E.M.S. Namboodripad were dominant in Kerala. This faction advocated a “peaceful transition” to socialism. In contrast, the influence of the Naxalites, a much more radical wing of the opposing CP(ML), was also beginning to be felt in Kerala at this time. As the narrator says when the Ipe family are en route to the cinema in Cochin and their car is surrounded by protesting workers: “There was an edge to [the marchers’] anger that was Naxalite, and new” (*TGST* 67).

- Highlight the ways in which these structures reinforce and contradict one another in the novel:
  - Despite being Christians, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma adhere to notions of social hierarchy which derive from the Hindu caste system.
  - Note the irony of Chacko’s professed communism: he is the relatively wealthy business-owner of Paradise Pickles and Preserves, but he claims sympathy with the demands of his own workers for better pay and conditions. Although he considers Comrade Pillai to be precisely that—a *comrade*—this feeling is not fully reciprocated as we see when Chacko visits Pillai at home (259-67).
  - Note also the prejudices exhibited by the communists in the novel against “untouchables” such as Velutha (*TGST* 115, 263); their resentment contradicts the Party’s stated aims of social justice for all Indians.

- Discuss the ways in which social structures are subverted in the novel:
  - Ammu and Velutha’s relationship
  - Rahel and Estha’s relationship

Discussion Questions:

- How does the caste system affect the characters in Roy’s novel? What does Roy’s characterization of Velutha and his father suggest about her attitude to the caste system? What
are the possible benefits and drawbacks of this kind of social organization? What kinds of things organize American society and how have these changed over time?

- Why is Ammu and Velutha’s relationship considered to be so outrageous? Why do you think this kind of intimate interaction between members of different castes is seen as dangerous by characters such as Mammachi and Baby Kochamma? What are the other ways in which social structures are subverted in the novel?
- How does Roy characterize communists, such as Comrade Pillai and Chacko (cf. TGST 63-63; 113-16)? Why does Ammu call Chacko’s communism “hogwash” (TGST 63)? What is the nature of the relationship between Comrade Pillai and Chacko? (See especially Ch. 14 “Work is Struggle”.) Why does Comrade Pillai deny Velutha help when he seeks the Party’s support after the discovery of his relationship with Ammu (TGST 248, 271)?
- How does Roy characterize the Syrian Christian community through her portrayal of Mammachi in particular? Why does Baby Kochamma convert to Roman Catholicism?
- How do the “big things” in the novel (e.g. religion, caste, politics) affect “small things” (e.g. romance, daily life, family dynamics)? Do the “small things” affect the “big things” in any way? Who is “the God of Small Things”?

Assignment and Project Ideas:
- Ask students to reflect on the “big things” which affect the “small things” in their own lives.
- Stage a debate about why Velutha died. Ask individual or small groups of students to assume the role of different “key witnesses” from the novel: the twins; Chacko; Baby Kochamma; Mammachi; Ammu; Comrade Pillai; the factory workers; Inspector Thomas Mathew, etc. Give each of them time to write down and present (in character) the reasons why they believe Velutha died. (Ask them to reflect not only on his actual murder, but also the events building up to it.) You can serve as a “cross-examiner,” prompting them to expand on and/or defend their answers.

Suggestions for expanding this unit:
The caste system can seem strange and outdated to students first learning about it, so it is important to invite reflection on why it has been and still is so significant for many Indians. Invite them to conduct further research into this social system by watching excerpts from the recent documentary India Untouched, available in 10-minute segments on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_UnVZT0-0k and in full: http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/5752/India-Untouched---Stories-of-a-People-Apart-