UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA WILMINGTON

UNITING POSTCOLONIALISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM THROUGH HISTORIOGRAPHIC STORYTELLING IN THE WRITING OF ARUNDHATI ROY

Jacqueline N. Kerr

A Thesis Submitted to the University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of English
University of North Carolina Wilmington
2011

Approved by

Advisory Committee

Diana Ashe William Alexander

Cara Cilano
Chair

Accepted by

Dean, Graduate School
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................................iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .........................................................................................................................iv

DEDICATION ...............................................................................................................................................v

INTRODUCTION ..........................................................................................................................................1

CHAPTER ONE: “A Sense of Historical Perspective”: Reconnecting People and Place
through Historicity in *The God of Small Things* .....................................................................................7

CHAPTER TWO: “A whole other dimension to the story”: Historiographic Storytelling in
Roy’s “The Greater Common Good” ........................................................................................................27

CHAPTER THREE: “We have to fight specific wars in specific ways”: Historicization,
Environmental Justice, and Arundhati Roy ............................................................................................40

WORKS CITED ..........................................................................................................................................54
ABSTRACT

I argue that the historiographic component to Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy’s storytelling in both her novel *The God of Small Things* and her nonfiction essays (specifically, “The Greater Common Good”) functions as the connective tissue that binds the theories of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. As a result of her use of historicization to close the distance between power and powerlessness, I maintain that Roy’s fiction and nonfiction writing cannot and should not be separated from one another. Furthermore, Roy utilizes both the mediums of fiction and nonfiction to present poignant petitions for environmental justice that call for the fair and equitable treatment of both people and place. By exhibiting how a nation’s people and its environment are inextricably linked, she is in effect working to establish both civil and terrestrial rights. Roy’s historiographic storytelling constructs corporeal and topographical palimpsests, which serve as physical evidence of the terrible injustices meted out upon the India’s people and its environment as a result of globalization. She uses her writing to not only bring these civil and terrestrial injustices to light, but also advocate for social and environmental change. Through her writing, she proposes that a way to combat the oppressive, all-consuming force of globalism is for people to be made aware of the specifics surrounding globalization—Who gets to make the decisions and why? Who is affected by the decisions and why? What information is being concealed and why? Her writing makes visible the typically invisible connections between routinely isolated historical and political events, and both the people and the landscapes that are drastically affected by the postcolonial nation’s drive to successfully modernize and develop according to Western standards. Ultimately, Roy’s writing yokes the concerns of postcolonialism and environmentalism, for the information that she discloses in her narratives of connection can be used by human and environmental activists to lobby for civil and terrestrial rights.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Cara Cilano for taking the time to direct this thesis. Without her I would have been unable to explore a topic which truly interested me. She has made this daunting process not only manageable, but exciting!

I would also like to thank Dr. Diana Ashe and Dr. William Alexander for their continued guidance and support throughout this project.

Finally, I would like to thank my peers in the Master’s Program in English at UNCW for all of their advice, encouragement, and praise. I could not have done this without all of you.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband, Matthew Kerr, for his unending support and inspiration. His constant encouragement and belief in my abilities have helped me to maintain my sanity throughout this arduous process.

I also dedicate this thesis to the late Ronald A. Brown for providing a significant influence on my development as both a scholar and an individual. My grandfather was a great man and mentor and he will always be missed.
INTRODUCTION

The distance between power and powerlessness, between those who take decisions and those who have to suffer the decisions, has increased enormously. It’s a perilous journey for the poor—it’s a pitfall filled with overflowing lies, brutality, and injustice. Sitting in Washington or Geneva in the offices of the World Bank or the WTO, bureaucrats have the power to decide the fate of millions. [...] The further and further away geographically decisions are taken, the more scope you have for incredible injustice.

—Arundhati Roy, The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile

In the vast critical landscape that surrounds Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy’s 1997 Booker Prize-winning novel The God of Small Things, one can see that several theories of literary criticism have become very popular vantage points from which to examine Roy’s work. Typically, the lenses of feminism, psychoanalysis, and postcolonialism are a few of the favorites among respective scholars. Roy’s sentiments toward social injustice and feminist politics have prompted numerous feminist critics to write about the novel’s representations of gender oppression, male/female relations, female sexuality, and sexual ethics. Other critics have taken a psychoanalytical perspective, focusing on the novel as a trauma narrative and looking specifically at the ways in which being witness to a traumatic event contributes to the identity formation and psychological development of the story’s two main protagonists, dizygotic twins Estha and Rahel. While these first two methodologies have certainly produced insightful and indispensable evaluations of Roy’s novel, the approach that has yielded the highest volume of

---

1 For feminist treatments of Roy’s novel, see Brinda Bose’s “In Desire and Death Eroticism and Politics in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Feminism, State Fictions and Violence: Gender, Geopolitics and Transnationalism” and “Paranoia, Pollution, and Sexuality: Affiliations between E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; Mohini Khot’s “The Feminist Voice in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; Janet Thomann’s “The Ethical Subject of The God of Small Things”; Miriam Nandi’s “Longing for the Lost (M)other: Postcolonial Ambivalences in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; and Tirhankar Chanda’s “Sexual/Textual Strategies in The God Of Small Things.”

2 For psychoanalytical readings of Roy’s novel, see Chris L. Fox’s “A Martyrology of the Abject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; Elizabeth Outka’s “Trauma and Temporal Hybridity in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; Chantal Delourme’s “Haunted Times in The God Of Small Things”; and Joanne Lipson Freed’s “The Ethics of Identification: The Global Circulation of Traumatic Narrative in Silko’s Ceremony and Roy’s The God of Small Things.”
criticism is that of the postcolonial perspective. As an Indian author writing about the effects of colonialism and independence, Roy has been a central focus for numerous postcolonial scholars, who have focused on caste politics; agency and identities; the politics of space and place; and history.

Over the past decade, Roy’s novel has also been evaluated from an ecocritical standpoint. A rapidly emerging method of literary analysis, ecocriticism works to analyze representations of the environment in literature and to discuss the possible solutions for environmental change that are present in texts. Recent publications addressing The God of Small Things as a postcolonial and ecocritical text have yielded much fruitful analysis regarding the possibilities for changing the current environmental situation that Roy addresses. This current trend of dual analysis is a remarkable achievement, seeing as how, due to conflicting ideologies, these two theoretical methodologies have been running parallel instead of intersecting with one another. Still, there are clear points of overlap between the two theories, and American scholar Rob Nixon devotes his

3 See Ajay Sekher’s “Older than the Church: Christianity and Caste in The God of Small Things”; Pumla Dineo Gqola’s “History was Caught Off Guard”: Gendered Caste, Class and Manipulation in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; Doreen D’Cruz’s “Configuring the Dynamics of Dispossession in Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; J. A. Kearney’s “Glimpses of Agency in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; and Deepa S. Reddy’s “The Ethnicity of Caste.”
5 See Cilano; Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Spatial Poetics and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; Cynthia Carey’s “The Architecture of Place in The God of Small Things”; and Daisy Rockwell’s “The Shape of a Place: Translation and Cultural Marking in South Asian Fictions.”
2005 essay “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism” to delineating these areas of agreement and contention. Both critical approaches, Nixon explains, deal with “the fraught relations between ethnicity, pollution, and human rights” as well as with “the equally fraught relations between local, national, and global politics” (234). Unfortunately, key points of disagreement “over the politics of purity, place, nation, and history” (235) prevent postcolonialists and ecocritics from ever reaching a common ground.

Postcolonial approaches to literature have made gallant strides to challenge essentialism by petitioning for “hybridity and cross-culturation”; to plead for a place for the displaced; to lobby for “the cosmopolitan and the transnational”; as well as to demand that history must be reimagined and retold by multiple and multi-ethnic voices (Nixon 235). Ecocritical studies, on the other hand, have a tendency to negate much of the work postcolonialism accomplishes. Ecocritics are apt to be attracted to “discourses of purity” praising and calling for a return to unspoiled nature, as opposed to hybridity; to give preferential treatment to the literature of place and as a result, view the displaced as a threat to the ethics of place; and to subordinate or suppress history “to the pursuit of timeless, solitary communion with nature” (235). Ultimately, ecocritics place a premium on the preservation of the same dominant Western ideals and grand narratives that postcolonialists work so hard to break down and then rebuild in accordance with civil rights.

Nixon, along with many others, believes that, despite their numerous differences, these two methodologies would be better served working in conjunction with one another and suggests that one of the ways to achieve a union would be to engage in “comparative international readings” (245). Reading works in the two typically disparate critical genres alongside one another would promote diversity in what has become “the standard Americanist ecocanon”
That is, Nixon sees ecocriticism as being dominated by American scholars who focus on literatures written by the same dead, white, male authors—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold, to name a few—who comprise the American literary canon. These mono-national and mono-ethnic literatures only succeed in isolating environmentalism and confirming the U.S. as the world’s dominant and privileged nation. To provide the approach with a more comprehensive, polyvocal, and global perspectives of environmental concerns, ecocritics need to incorporate transnational texts. Reading the work of international authors alongside that of canonical American writers would reveal that history differs drastically depending on the person or the institution telling it. A comparative international reading would also, according to Nixon, promote connectivity between environmental and postcolonial concerns. In an attempt to take Nixon up on his suggestion, I believe that reading *The God of Small Things* alongside Roy’s nonfiction will work to construct a bridge between postcolonialism and ecocriticism, one that connects the critical components of Indian life, such as politics, economics, and ecology to the serious effects and repercussions that they have on living people and the environment.

As Nixon mentions, one of the primary complications preventing a convergence is the issue of historicization, as postcolonialism works to reconstruct the histories of marginalized and displaced people, while environmental writing tends to ignore or even erase these histories by invoking “the myth of the empty lands” (235). Roy counters the isolationist thinking present in environmentalism by reimagining history. In so doing, she makes visible the typically invisible connections between routinely isolated historical and political events, and both the people and the landscapes that are drastically affected by the postcolonial nation’s drive to successfully modernize and develop according to Western standards. The historiographic component to her
storytelling in both *The God of Small Things* and her nonfiction essays functions as the connective tissue that binds postcolonialism and environmentalism. Her writing promotes cultural awareness of the exploitation and marginalization that globalization inflicts on Indian people as well as on the country’s environment, and ultimately calls for social and environmental change.

Consequently, Roy utilizes both the mediums of fiction and nonfiction to present poignant petitions for environmental justice that call for the fair and equitable treatment of both people and place. By exhibiting how a nation’s people and its environment are inextricably linked, she is in effect working to establish both civil and terrestrial rights. Roy’s historiographic storytelling constructs corporeal and topographical palimpsests, which serve as physical evidence of the terrible injustices meted out upon India’s people and its environment as a result of globalization. She uses her writing to not only bring these civil and terrestrial injustices to light, but also advocate for social and environmental change. Through her writing, she proposes that a way to combat the oppressive, all-consuming force of globalism is for humans to “fight specific wars in specific ways” (“Common Good” 12). That is, for people to be made aware of the particulars surrounding globalization—Who gets to make the decisions and why? Who is affected by the decisions and why? What information is being concealed and why? Armed with the answers to these questions, Roy believes that those who have been powerless will be able to wage war against the powerful, and to ultimately achieve civil and terrestrial rights.

To demonstrate my points, I present a three part argument. The first and second look at the integral role that storytelling plays in *The God of Small Things* and Roy’s nonfiction to reconnect a displaced people not only with their pasts but also with their local environment. Roy’s writing reveals that situating oneself within one’s history and environmental locality are
integral elements in identity formation. Hence, I will read her novel alongside her essay “The Greater Common Good” in order to examine how, structurally, the two different genres advocate the same move. In order to construct a bridge between the theories of postcolonialism and ecocriticism, the third examines her writing for the catastrophic effects that globalization has on India’s people and its land. Roy’s intricately connected narratives work to close the geographical “distance between power and powerlessness” and, in so doing, provide opportunities for social and environmental justice movements to make advancements for civil and terrestrial rights.
CHAPTER ONE: “A Sense of Historical Perspective”: Reconnecting People and Place through Historicity in The God of Small Things

It’s very important for me to tell politics like a story, to make it real, to draw a link between a man with his child and what fruit he had in the village he lived in before he was kicked out, and how that relates to Mr. Wolfensohn at the World Bank. That’s what I want to do. The God of Small Things is a book where you connect the very smallest things to the very biggest: whether it’s the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom.

—Arundhati Roy, “Interview with Arundhati Roy"

In a 2001 interview, Armenian-American radio producer David Barsamian asked Indian writer and political activist Arundhati Roy what it was like for her to transition “from writing in a world of fiction and imagination to writing about concrete things, like dams, people being displaced in the Narmada Valley, globalization, and Enron?” (Checkbook 9). Roy confessed, “I don’t see a great difference between The God of Small Things and my nonfiction. In fact, I keep saying, fiction is the truest thing there ever was” (qtd. in Checkbook 10). In her novel, Roy weaves an intricate narrative of connection between “power and powerlessness” (14). Through fiction, she articulates the effects and repercussions that a nation and a world’s politics, economics, and ecologies have on the Indian people who have been disenfranchised by colonialism, social stratification, and globalism. The story she tells is concerned with historiography and works to reconnect Indians to the historical and local spaces that they had, for decades, been denied as a result of colonization and, later, globalization—connections that Roy’s narrative indicates are imperative to the constructions of Indian identities.

Set in postcolonial India in the state of Kerala, on the country’s southernmost tip in the city of Ayemenem, The God of Small Things chronicles the catastrophic collapse of an Indian family. The story begins twenty-three years after the horrific chain of events that changed their lives, but, through Roy’s usage of the postmodern technique of nontraditional form, the past and
present are intricately woven together into a fluid and formidable narrative. The members of the wealthy, upper-caste Ipe family—Soshamma (Mammachi, or “grandmother”), her son Chacko, her daughter Ammu, Ammu’s twin daughter and son Rahel and Esthappen Yoko (Estha), and Mammachi’s late husband Shri Benaan John Ipe’s (Pappachi) sister Navomi (Baby Kochamma)—all suffer the dire consequences of a forbidden love between Ammu and Velutha, an Untouchable, “a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie” (GOST 244).

Ammu and Velutha’s indiscretion coupled with Baby Kochamma’s lie about the vile desecration of India’s caste system triggers a chain of events that drastically alters the lives of all who are involved, as each faces the painful reality “that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes” (GOST 32). The twins, together with their uncle Chacko’s half-white daughter Sophie Mol, decide to escape the turmoil facing the family by crossing the river by their house to reach their secret hideout on the other side of the water. However, their tiny boat capsizes and Sophie Mol drowns. Velutha is brutally beaten by the Kottayam police officers and dies soon after he is taken to the police station to face charges of rape. Estha, tricked by Baby Kochamma into believing that his mother would be sent to prison if he does not identify Velutha as the perpetrator, reluctantly obeys his great aunt and seals Velutha’s fate. Determined to prevent her web of lies from being unraveled, Baby Kochamma devises a plan for Ammu to be cast out of the family and for the twins to be separated. As a result, Ammu spends the rest of her short life (she dies four years later, at the age of thirty-one) as an indigent. Estha is “Returned” (10), sent to live with his father in Calcutta, and Rahel is forced to stay in Ayemenem to be raised by Mammachi and Chacko. And, to use the narrator’s words, “these are only the small things” (5).
For the rest of their lives, each family member is haunted by the role he or she played in causing the horrifying outcome. Mammachi and Chacko are haunted by “the Loss of Sophie Mol [that] stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks” (GOST 17). Baby Kochamma is relentlessly hounded by “the fear of being dispossessed” (67). Rahel and Estha, who witnessed Velutha’s beating, are plagued by ghastly memories of what they repeatedly refer to as “the Terror.” However, by presenting readers with the different ways that each person views what happened, Roy is able to demonstrate that a story differs drastically depending on the person or the institution that is telling it. There are “Official” and “Unofficial” versions of the same event, and the “Unofficial” versions are the keys to making visible the Big things—the large, organized, pervasive forces that govern societies and work in insidious ways to control how people see and how they are seen. Roy provides a space for the “Unofficial” versions to get told, and in so doing, works to reconnect a lost people to the past that is rightfully theirs and to obliterate the control that the privileged minority—those tellers of the “Official” versions—has sustained for so long.

This particular aspect of Roy’s novel—the retelling of history through the perspective of the oppressed subaltern subject—has also been addressed by postcolonial critics. Each author considers history as a fiction that was constructed by members of the dominant ideology for the purposes of preserving power. This particular method of analysis was made possible by historian Hayden White. In 1974, White published his revolutionary and controversial essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” that categorized historical accounts—which had previously been deemed sacrosanct and absolute—as fictions and considered historians as storytellers who

---

8 See Aïda Balvannadhan’s “Re-Membering Personal History in The God of Small Things”; Pumla Dineo Gqola’s “‘History was Caught Off Guard’: Gendered Caste, Class and Manipulation in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; Anuradha Dingwaney Needham’s “‘The Small Voice of History’ in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”; and Sheena Patchay’s “Pickled Histories, Bottled Stories: Recuperative Narratives in The God of Small Things.”
piece together subjective narratives about the past. This article was not the first time White conveyed his radical theory. A year earlier, in his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, White argues that the historian, in essence, creates a fictional history by taking chronological events, arranging them as he sees fit (reorganizing, reversing, omitting), and filling in the gaps between each event with a narrative that attempts to answer questions such as: What happened? How did it happen? When? and Why? This particular way of thinking about history depicts the historian not as an objective interpreter who simply works to bring the past to the masses but as a storyteller who discursively creates the past he is documenting.

In addition to metahistory, another way White has significantly affected historical thought is, according to Herman Paul in his book *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination*, with the concept of “liberation historiography,” or the ability of a radical shift in historical theory (by way of White’s concept of metahistory) to free historians from the shackling conventions of history (41). As Adam Timmons notes in a review of Paul’s book, White publicized that “[t]he historical profession was not formed in a vacuum; and historical practice was not a matter of *a priori* rules. Rather, as one of White’s teaching assistants put it, ‘what I got from it all was that history had a history’” (par. 6). It is this very belief that historical records are not devoid of any connection to other people or events, but rather motivated and shaped by those who write them, that leads Paul to argue for “how important it is to see White not as a philosopher of professional historiography, but as a politically engaged thinker concerned about the relations that people develop with their pasts” (41). In fact, the integral role that situating oneself in history plays in a person’s identity formation is a key concern of postcolonial thought. Additionally, White’s attempts to revamp historical theory inspired the development of an entirely new offshoot in the
historical field called revisionist history, in which historians interpret history from a plurality of viewpoints (Kellner 6). The idea that history should comprise an element of polyvocality also resonates with postcolonial literature, which works to show that there are different ways of seeing the same event. In so doing, postcolonialist authors make known that there is more than one side to a story.

The historiographic component in Roy’s novel reconnects those people who have been written out of history to their rightful bonds with the past and to their ancestral land. “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one” reads the opening quote to The God of Small Things. Roy uses this line taken from John Berger’s 1972 Booker Prize-winning novel G to signal to readers that the following story will be a retelling of a dominant narrative in order to give a voice to those people who have historically been relegated into silence. From the onset, her use of Berger’s quote casts the story under a microscope. If no story will ever again be told as though it is the only account, then what should readers expect from this tale and what can they believe about it? This confusion is most likely something that Roy wants readers to experience as they read her novel. Just as the story she tells interrogates the historical grand narrative, so too should readers engage in this process of questioning the legitimacy of the stories—the political, historical, and cultural narratives—presented to them by dominant institutions. As such, her storytelling functions as a means of exposing the relationship between power and powerlessness and of connecting global matters to local matters.

Indeed, Roy’s writing reveals that situating oneself within one’s history and local environment are integral elements in the formation of Indian subjectivities. In the novel, she presents two main ways that Indians construct their identities: through their ability to submit to the prevailing ideologies of dominant global powers (primarily England and America) or through
the land that they inhabit. In terms of the latter, Roy uses the character of Velutha as an example of this terrestrial identity formation. The former, however, is a symptom of colonialism and later of globalism, and, for Roy, an unnatural foundation to use for the construction of a productive Indian subjectivity. Baby Kochamma can be seen as an incompatible fusion of Indian, British, and American philosophies. However, historiography allows readers to understand that Baby Kochamma is not completely to blame for her allegiances to other nations; in fact, powerful political, economic, and global forces worked concurrently to ensure that the powerless accepted their artificial identity formations by systematically excising their connections to their history and their land.

In 1960s India, during which part of the novel is set, the historical record still served to glorify the victors (read “white English men”) and to further subjugate the defeated (read “everyone else”) by prohibiting them a place in history. As Chacko Ipe explains, because their colonizers have barred their way, have “capture[d] their dreams and re-dream[ed] them,” it is impossible for the indigenous peoples of a once colonized nation to know their history (GOST 52). As a result, Indians live their lives “trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints have been swept away” (52). The inability to connect to the past has drastic effects, for, as prominent art critic and novelist John Berger explains, “A people or class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history” (Ways of Seeing 33). A people without a history are a lost people—a people who are frantically searching for their place in the world. However, their attempts to locate themselves in history are futile because they cannot situate themselves in something that does not exist. A people with no past become easy to control. Thus, when the most powerful nation in the world offers them, the weak and the history-less, a mere
footnote within the History—the grand Western narrative—the lost people stand in reverence of the boon. They submit to the ruling class and have no power to prevent their history from being written for them.

This submission to their conquerors is all too evident to Chacko, who, although he regrets to admit it, realizes that the Ipes are “a family of Anglophiles” (GOST 51). Because Pappachi—the Ipe family patriarch—had devoted his life to working for the British-controlled Indian Government as an Imperial Etymologist before India gained its independence, he developed a disposition for all things English—including their history. His years of subservience to the British resulted in his educating his family to be “like the English” (51). Denied one of the most basic necessities for identity formation—the ability to situate oneself in history—Indians have long been “Prisoners of War.” Chacko (who ironically moralizes his country’s situation in the way that only an Oxford educated, “spoiled princeling […] of the old zamindar mentality” could [63]) laments, “Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter” (52). Chacko believes that for Indians to completely comprehend their past they must be allowed entrance into history, which he likens to “an old house at night” (51). His concept is akin to a metaphorical rest home where the nation’s ancestors, the preservers of the past, sit “whispering inside.” Chacko tells the Estha and Rahel that Indians must be permitted to “go inside and listen to what they [the nation’s ancestors] are saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the walls. And smell the smells” (51). However, admittance inside the History House is something that he thinks will never happen, for colonialism and its after-effects will forever
prevent Indians from truly knowing their past and from the ability to construct their personal identities as Indians.

Ironically, young Estha and Rahel immediately link Chacko’s metaphorical house to “the abandoned rubber estate” of Kari Saipu, “[t]he Englishman who had ‘gone native’” and christen it the History House (*GOST* 51). That the twins automatically assume the past originates in a dilapidated, vacant house once owned by a white man reveals the persistent, residual effects that colonization has on occupied nations, even after gaining independence. The old, empty house can also be seen as a metaphor for the history imposed upon a colonized nation by its colonizers: though it looks like a house from the outside, on the inside, it is empty. In the same way, the authoritative histories of the world give the appearance of being factual and objective accounts of the past; yet, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that these histories are fabricated and meaningless, serving only to further subjugate the colonized. However, reading the Official versions of events written by the conquerors alongside the Unofficial versions written by the conquered, which is what Roy achieves in her novel, supplies history with the plurality of viewpoints essential to reimagining the past in terms of those who have purposefully been written out of it.

Thus, the story that Roy tells in *The God of Small Things* works to provide Indians with full access to their own History House, and the way that she achieves this reconnection to history is through her narrative structure. Roy’s deliberate abandonment of the novel’s traditional form allows her to not only reconstruct the stories that surround the characters but also demonstrate the larger, pervasive, and powerful forces that played pivotal roles in the shaping of their lives and their ideologies. From the moment the novel begins it takes on a disjointed form; it is told through a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards that seem to be in no discernible order. The
non-sequential plot could at first be construed as aleatory writing in that it seems to have been achieved by random means, as though Roy ordered her narrative by tossing a die. However, in all actuality, “[t]hose who practice aleatoric techniques are somewhat more deliberate. They do not leave things to chance; they create the opportunities of chance. There is a certain ‘method’ to their ‘madness’” (Cuddon 18). Although the way that the novel unfolds seems haphazard, Roy has truly achieved an exceptional example of calculated coincidence. By jumbling up the sequence of events, Roy works to break the control that traditional narrative form has had over the way that readers read and, ultimately, the way that they understand history.

The narrative line continuously bends and reverses, and in so doing, weaves the seemingly disconnected and fragmentary tales of the characters into a strategically motivated narrative that connects the characters and the ways that they think and act to global and local matters. The narrative’s temporal and spatial shifts in storytelling have a profound effect on the ways that readers come to understand the novel’s characters—their motivations, their desires, and their thought processes. In the case of Baby Kochamma, how her story gets told depicts her as both a victim and a perpetrator of terrible injustice. To demonstrate this to readers, Roy repeatedly implements flashbacks into history, which serve not only to allow readers to get a better understanding of Baby Kochamma’s character but also to make visible the influences that Indian caste politics, colonialism, and globalism have on the identity formation of a Indian people.

As a case in point, the snaking, historiographic plotline reveals Baby Kochamma’s dual role as a victim and a perpetrator of injustice through the story of how she comes to impose this unjust treatment on her native soil in the form of her ornamental garden. Baby Kochamma’s story begins when she is a satellite television-watching, slovenly house-keeping, materialistic, and suspicious eighty-three year old woman. To help readers understand how she got to be this
way, the narrator deftly reverses the storyline to when Baby is a lovelorn eighteen-year-old, who converts to Roman Catholicism with the hopes of being near her object of affection—a young Irish monk named Father Mulligan. Readers learn that at this point in her life, Baby Kochamma’s identity has already been significantly shaped by the powerful forces of India’s caste system and the British Raj. As the daughter of an eminent priest in the Syrian Christian Church, she enjoys a privileged, wealthy social station that provides her with choices and opportunities; however, her position in history during colonization simultaneously limits and dictates those choices as well as her identity formation. At eighty-three in 1992, Baby Kochamma would have been born sometime in 1909 when British control over India was at its peak. As Ramachandra Guha explains in *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy*, “[b]y 1888, the British were so solidly established in India that they could look forward to, if not a thousand year Raj, at least a rule that extended well beyond their own lifetimes” (2). And they most certainly did enjoy decades of imperialism that had profound effects on the Indian people, whose identities, as one would expect, came to mirror the same characteristics and affinities as those of their English conquerors. Moreover, Baby Kochamma’s already clashing belief system continues to be further swayed by American ideology during the two years she spends in New York at the University of Rochester, working towards a degree in Ornamental Gardening.

After her return to Ayemenem, her father, “[t]o keep her from brooding” about Father Mulligan, puts his daughter in “charge of the front garden of the Ayemenem House, where she raised a fierce, bitter garden” (*GOST* 26) consisting of unusual, ornamental plants that must be rigorously tended to in order to maintain their aesthetic appeal. In an effort to keep her foliage flourishing,
Baby Kochamma spent her afternoons in her garden. In a sari and gum boots. She wielded an enormous pair of hedge shears in her bright-orange gardening gloves. Like a lion tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava. (27)

In order to cultivate visually appealing plant life whose purpose is purely cosmetic with absolutely no utilitarian value, Baby Kochamma wages war with the environment. She invests a significant portion of her day maintaining her garden’s aesthetic integrity. With her terrestrial manipulation, she simultaneously displays her standing as a member of India’s upper-caste, “wealthy, estate-owning (pickle-factory-running), feudal lords” (63) and emulates her conquerors’ desire to possess and control the land. Furthermore, the fact that she wears a sari and gum boots can be seen as representative of the contradicting ideologies that work synchronously to shape her identity—she dresses in the traditional garb for Indian women yet wears a pair of rubber boots, footwear popularized by Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington that was fashionable for British nobility in the early 19th century (“Hunter History”). Additionally, she employs the gardening skills that she learned in America to compel a section of her native Indian soil to produce worthless harvests that only sate a hunger for dominance over nature rather than a hunger for sustenance.

In fact, the act of gardening itself can be seen as a method to dominate nature and a people. In My Garden (Book):, Caribbean novelist Jamaica Kincaid pointedly considers the repercussions that the garden as a means of colonization had on occupied nations, specifically on her homeland of Antigua. Gardening as a technique for possession and manipulation of the land (and by extension, a people) directly stems from “the English people, their love, their need to
isolate, name, objectify, possess various parts, people, and things in the world” (Kincaid 140). Several driving factors behind colonialism are the English nation’s desires to conquer, to own, and to control the world according to its terms. These desires can certainly be seen at play in the case of ornamental gardening, which manipulates nature to achieve exotic and visually pleasing landscapes. When the English occupied nations, they introduced (read: “forced”) gardening into many native cultures. An effect of this compulsory horticulture, writes Kincaid, is that “[w]hen these people (the Antiguans) lived under the influence of those other people (the English) there was naturally an attempt among certain of them to imitate their rulers in this particular way, arranging a landscape, and they did this without question; they can’t be faulted for what it was they were doing, that is the way these things work” (134). For Kincaid, a colonized people will come to adopt the mannerisms, the belief systems, the hobbies of their conquerors through no choice of their own—it is just something that happens to a people powerless to stop the powerful from capturing both their history and their local environments. Once a people are broken and rebuilt during colonization, the ways in which they think and act are no longer their own, but those of the dominant ideology. In the case of Baby Kochamma, she is powerless to protect herself against the form that her identity takes. She never had a chance to escape the dominant English and American ideologies that she is exposed to. Unfortunately, as a result, she is denied her right to situate herself in her own history and environmental locality, two elements that Roy sees as necessary in order to form a productive Indian identity.

Through the representation of Velutha in The God of Small Things, Roy suggests that a relationship with nature can provide a way to get inside the History House and make a connection with those papery and whispering ancestors who protect the history of Indian culture. His purpose in the narrative seems to be twofold in that Roy uses him as an example of her ideal
terrestrial identity formation and as a means to show how the powerful forces of caste, colonialism and communism play vital parts in inflicting injustice on the powerless. In terms of his character, the way his story gets told depicts him as the ideal Indian man. The narrator romanticizes Velutha and portrays him as benevolent, selfless, and noble. As a member of the Untouchable caste, Velutha is an outcast who has no worldly possessions. Instead, he develops a profound communion with nature that, through storytelling, Roy suggests is essential to the formation of a strong Indian identity—one carved from the very locality that Velutha depends on for his livelihood as well as for sustenance. He has “natural skills” in carpentry—a profession that requires a “remarkable facility with his hands” so much so that “[h]e was like a little magician with his creations” (GOST 71). At eleven, “[h]e could make intricate toys—tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts” (71). Roy repeatedly uses natural imagery to invoke the sense that Velutha simultaneously shapes and is shaped by his local environment. One of the most powerful displays of this imagery can be seen in Ammu’s description of her soon-to-be lover as he emerges from the river and makes his way to her. She says

that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. How his labor had shaped him. How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him. Each plank he planed, each nail he drove, each thing he made had molded him. Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace. (315-16)

Ammu’s romanticized construction of Velutha works to show that an Indian’s close relationship with his locality is integral to his sense of self. Such a terrestrial connection fosters a communion
with nature that encourages people to protect and care for the land they live on. In Velutha’s case, he does not try to “wage war” on his surroundings by forcing the land to be something it cannot be or to sustain things that it cannot grow. Unlike Baby Kochamma, Velutha’s nurturing treatment of the land yields bountiful local fruit, fish, and carpentry materials. Roy’s portrayal of Velutha has a specific purpose, which is show the reader that an intimate connection with nature contributes to his deep understanding of himself as an Indian man and of his place in the world.

Arguably, Roy’s sentimentalized representation could certainly be dismissed as idealism; Velutha, like Baby Kochamma, is not without his contradictions. His communal relationship with the land promotes a biocentrism perspective, which to use the words of Ramachandra Guha, believes that “other species of plants and animals, and nature itself, have an intrinsic right to exist” (2). In other words, the environment is home to all walks of life, not just humans, and each species, from “the very smallest things to the very biggest” (Roy, qtd. in Checkbook 11), is entitled to live. As such, the environment cannot be owned, cannot be partitioned and parceled according to its use value. Yet, Velutha is still a Marxist, a believer that the world is understood in terms of value, price, and profit. How can he be both a biocentrist and a communist? Whereas Roy’s narrator is quick to point out the contradictions that comprise Baby Kochamma in an effort to demonstrate how her sense of self hinges on the prevailing ideologies of dominant global powers, the narrator downplays Velutha’s inconsistencies. His ancillary role as Marxist is dwarfed by his starring role as doomed Untouchable waiting “for his blind-date with history” (GOST 266). In fact, the way Roy tells Velutha’s story depicts him as always already a victim of the pervasive forces of caste, colonialism, and communism, which all have a hand in his death.

Although Velutha’s beating is arguably the most significant moment in the novel, Roy’s narrator refuses to give readers the whole story up front, instead supplying Velutha’s tale to them
in tortuous, nonlinear increments. Telling the story in this manner allows Roy to historicize what happens to Velutha and to make a space for his character within the dominant historical narrative—the Official Version—that so blatantly disregarded him. Her historiographic storytelling allows readers to understand what was going on politically, socially, and economically in local, state, and global matters. By linking typically disparate events into a comprehensive narrative, Roy holds accountable the large, powerful forces of caste, colonialism, and Marxism that are responsible for Velutha’s brutal and unjust beating. Although seemingly independent, these institutions are all deeply enmeshed with one another and work synchronously to regulate and define the nation’s people. Throughout the novel, the narrator skillfully links these forces together so as to close the “distance between power and powerlessness” (Roy, qtd. in Checkbook 14) by exposing who had power over whom and why.

For instance, to explain the roles that each force plays in Velutha’s fate, the narrator begins with the story of that “skyblue December day in sixty-nine” when Baby Kochamma, Chacko, Ammu, Estha, and Rahel pile into the family’s skyblue Plymouth for a trip to Cochin to pick up Chacko’s ex-wife Margaret Kochamma and his daughter Sophie Mol. The storytelling, however, is anything but innocent as the narrator intends to use this part of the narrative as a way to connect specific forces to specific events. Almost halfway to their destination, the family is forced to wait for a passing train. As they sit in traffic, a local division of Kerala’s Communist Party marches through the parked cars, with “red flags and banners and a hum that grew and grew” (GOST 62). The narrator takes this opportunity to historicize the evolution of India’s government and explain how Marxism gained popularity in Kerala. After dismissing the two leading theories (“the large population of Christians in the state” and “the comparatively high level of literacy in the state” [64]) as red herrings, the narrator reveals that
The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (64)

As this passage illustrates, the truth to the movement was that it was no movement at all. It did not offer a path to social reform; it simply combined and repackaged traditional Indian hierarchies and beliefs under a new name in order for a different group of people to gain political power.

However, through historiography, the narrator also makes visible the distinct connections between Marxism and caste. For Untouchables, in search of a reprieve from the “scourge of Untouchability” (*GOST* 71), communism promised an escape from unjust treatment. According to Guha in his history of India, the state of Kerala, already part of a nation “riven by inequality,” “still stood out for the oppressiveness of its caste system. Here, the lowest of the low were not merely untouchable but ‘unseeable.’ When Namboordiri Brahmin approached, a Paraiya laborer had to cry out in advance, lest the sight of him pollute his superior” (292). Through the character of Mammachi, Roy describes a similar instance of bigotry. Mammachi tells Estha and Rahel “that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint” (*GOST* 71). It is only natural that people would seek to escape such dehumanizing treatment. Many Untouchables latched on to communism because, as Guha explains, it “undermined traditional structures of
authority” (292). The People’s Government enticed Untouchables by touting their plan to reverse India’s power structure and obliterate the control that Touchables had over Untouchables. The movement threatened to level the playing field for all Indians by seizing land from wealthy zamindars and redistributing it to people of lower castes. Still, as Roy’s narrator divulges, the movement was never really about bringing justice to the Untouchables. Her storytelling uncovers the contradictions that bubbled under the surface of communism in India. For starters, wealthy landholders like Chacko became “self-proclaimed Marxist[s]” in order to manipulate their workers (GOST 62). Other upper-caste proponents like the novel’s Comrade Pillai exploited the movement for political advancement (and played a part in Velutha’s death). Furthermore, the communists in Kerala could not even agree with one another and kept splintering off into separate factions (“the Communist Party of India,” “the Communist Party of India (Marxist),” “the Chinese Communist Party, “the Naxalites” [65, 66]). The struggle over power and who got to have it and why eventually led to violence. “[A] landlord in Palghat,” the narrator explains, “had been tied to a lamp post and beheaded” (66). Hence, landowners lived in constant fear of violence, for “riots, strikes and incidents of police brutality [...] convulsed Kerala” (64).

As the narrator links communism to caste, he or she also weaves in the story of Velutha and shows how these forces worked to bring about his demise. To make these intricate connections, the narrator first links his story to Baby Kochamma’s. As the brigade of Communist marchers nears the motionless car, Baby Kochamma repeatedly tells Estha and Rahel to “Avoid eye contact. That’s what really provokes them” (GOST 63). In truth, what catches the Communist Party’s attention is the “skyblue Plymouth [which] looked absurdly opulent on the narrow, pitted road” (63). The car acts as a beacon, advertising the family as “the wealthy, estate-owning (pickle-factory-running), feudal lords, for whom communism represented a fate worse
than death” (63). The party members lose no time in honing their attention in on Baby Kochamma, whose own corpulence discloses her affluent status. After being singled out and humiliated by the marching, flag-waving members of the Communist Party, Baby Kochamma (aka “Modalali Mariakutty” according to a mocking party member. “Modalali in Malayalam means landlord” [76])” is confronted with the possible annihilation of everything that she holds dear—her status, her caste, and her stuff. Faced with the possible liquidation of her possessions (both material and ideological) in the name of socialism, Baby Kochamma’s fear becomes a living thing. It lay rolled up on the car floor like a damp, clammy cheroot. This was just the beginning of it. The fear that over the years would grow to consume her. That would make her lock her doors and windows. That would give her two hairlines and both her mouths. Hers too, was an ancient, age-old fear. The fear of being dispossessed. (67)

The humiliation Baby experiences and the ensuing fear of loss—of the looming threat of communism to strip her of the material things that define and represent her as an upper caste Indian woman—takes root deep inside of her. She focuses all of her hate and fear on Velutha—the recently spotted, knotted-armed, flag-waving Marxist—and these emotions motivate her decision to manipulate Velutha’s role in the turn of events, to exact her revenge by “misrepresent[] the relationship between Ammu and Velutha” in such a way that portrays him as the perpetrator of an unthinkable crime, of defiling a Touchable woman (245).

Through historiographic storytelling, Roy makes visible the role that Baby Kochamma’s lie has on the actions of the Kottayam Police. Upon hearing her misrepresentation, Inspector Thomas Mathews, who “ha[s] a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters—whole Touchable
generations waiting in their Touchable wombs,” decides that he must act, that he must protect his precious caste system, his age-old source of power and order, from being disturbed (GOST 245). The narrator explains that Inspector Mathews instructs his “posse of Touchable Policemen” (287)

to square the books and collect dues for those who broke its laws. Impelled by feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear—civilization’s fear of nature, men’s fear of women, power’s fear of powerlessness. […] What Esthappen and Rahel witnessed that morning […] was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions […] of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. […] History in live performance. […] They were not arresting a man, they were exorcising fear. […] They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (292-93)

Caste, ancient and formidable, is not a separate entity existing independently from the Indian people, but a part of them, beating from within like a heart. Therefore, Touchables, unable to disconnect themselves from their caste, work to shield it from harm, just as they would defend themselves. Velutha was merely a representation of all of their fears come true: the disruption of order and the threat of a revolution that would reverse the nation’s power structure. What happens to Velutha officially becomes an act motivated to protect the greater good of the nation. Velutha himself gets erased from history, as the narrator explains that no one “ever heard what happened to him. The God of Loss. The God of Small Things. He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors. […] It is unreasonable to expect a person to remember what she didn’t know had happened” (250). But, Roy’s use of historiographic storytelling as a
means to reveal what happened to Velutha serves as the novel’s most effective example of “how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom” (“Interview” par. 15). She uses her narrative to prove to readers that Velutha, her model of a successful Indian subjectivity whose strong sense of self comes from being both a part of and a protector of his local environment, did in fact exist and was unjustly and brutally annihilated by forces more powerful than he.

Throughout the novel, Roy’s use of historicization makes visible the intricate connections between the private lives of India’s people and the powerful, pervasive local, state, and global forces that work synchronously to affect the ways that a nation’s people come to understand themselves and the world around them. Her storytelling works to reconnect Indian people to their rightful bonds with their past and to demonstrate that Indian identity formation is a two-fold process: it necessitates that Indians forge a connection with their local environment, and it requires that Indians be permitted to situate themselves in their own history in order to achieve productive identities. Moreover, the tale she weaves shows that accounts of the past are not simply factual, disinterested chronologies of events and happenings, and that, as White revealed, histories are not written in a vacuum, but by people who have their own particular agendas and ways of seeing. By presenting readers with her own way of seeing and making sense of events that have stamped indelible marks on both her past and her country, Roy succeeds in reimagining history through a polyvocal narrative that locates Indians within the world’s grand historical narrative and also within their own local cultural heritage. In so doing, Roy reinforces John Berger’s claim that “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one,” and ultimately, changes the way that her readers understand history.
CHAPTER TWO: “A whole other dimension to the story”: Historiographic Storytelling in Roy’s “The Greater Common Good”

_The millions of displaced people don’t exist anymore. When history is written they won’t be in it. Not even as statistics._

—Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good”

In the Introduction to their recently published book _Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives_, editors Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt discuss the importance of making visible “the connections between natural and human catastrophe, military might and humanitarian action” (1). The collection of scholarly essays that comprise the book, Roos and Hunt say, work to inform readers of the effects that the world’s current status as “global community”—or transnational interconnected web of technological and economic advancements—has on the lives of contemporary populations and environments. For Roos and Hunt, although “globalism [has] enabled much positive response” in terms of speedy reactions to natural disasters and implementation of humanitarian efforts and aid for affected nations, the fact remains that “global economic forces were also partly responsible” for the catastrophes that took place. In fact, globalism can be seen as “a latter-day colonialism based upon economic and cultural imperialism” (3). Thought of in this perspective, the modern story of globalism is a canny rehashing of the established narrative of colonitization: “Western powers come to the economic, humanitarian, and occasionally military ‘rescue’ of ‘developing’ nations as predominantly ‘white’ civilization rides to the rescue of those needy others” (2). In an egregious case of plagiarism that has been overlooked time and time again, this new-old story gets told and retold as a narrative of progress and development.

Roy makes a similar observation in an interview with David Barsamian: “Those men in pin-striped suits addressing the peasants of India and other poor countries all over again—
assuring them that they’re being robbed for their own good, like long ago they were colonized for their own good—what’s the difference? What’s changed?” (qtd. in *Checkbook* 14). Picking up any of Roy’s nonfiction writing will confirm the fact that, indeed, little has changed from those old days of colonialism. India is still being manipulated and exploited at the behest of the powerful. What has changed, however, are the faces of those who do the exploiting. While Roos and Hunt are certainly correct in claiming that “predominantly ‘white’ civilization” sits at the helm of the world globalization movement, for Roy, other more familiar faces, such as India’s own government and elite, are also contributing to the effort. As Roy so eloquently puts it in her Preface to *The Cost of Living*, “Like the tiger in the Belgrade zoo during the NATO bombing, we’ve begun to eat our own limbs” (x). Ultimately, Roy uses storytelling to expose how both India’s people and its landscapes become casualties of the postcolonial nation’s drive to successfully modernize and develop according to Western standards.

In her 1999 essay “The Greater Common Good,” Roy focuses on what she believes to be one of India’s most “ruthlessly efficient” (23) stratagems to achieve modernization: dam-building. India, Roy notes, is considered “the world’s third largest dam-builder” (13). The nation has built 3,300 Big Dams since gaining its independence in 1947. India’s first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru played an influential part in the nation’s passion for dams. In fact, dam-building, in the eyes of the Indian government, has come “to be equated with nation-building” (13), and all negative effects of the process can be rationalized and justified as happening for the sake of the betterment of the nation, for “the Greater Common Good. That it’s being done in the name of Progress, in the name of the National Interest (which, of course, is paramount)” [21]. Yet again, Roy’s essay reveals, power trumps powerlessness as those who, like Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, have no “Locusts Stand I” (56) or legitimate claim to property are treated
as though they “don’t exist” (“Common Good” 20). Moreover, just like in Roy’s novel, there are official and unofficial versions of the story of Modern India, and the accounts that get neglected or, rather, purposefully ignored, are those of the people who have been displaced by these dams, who have been evicted from their land and stripped of their livelihoods by their country’s voracious crusade for modernity. To make sure that readers know these people exist and that their tales of suffering are real and deserving of a place in history, she uses her nonfiction writing as a medium to tell the stories of who gets affected and why. “Trust me,” she assures readers. “There’s a story here” (21). It follows, then, that in her desire “tell politics like a story” (qtd. in Checkbook 10), “The Greater Common Good” mimics what Roy achieves in The God of Small Things, which is to use storytelling—specifically historiography—as a narrative of connection that reveals the larger pervasive forces working behind the scenes to sever the civil rights of the Indian people and the terrestrial rights of the nation’s environment.

In this essay⁹, Roy both fictionalizes and historicizes the people and places being affected by one of India’s largest dam projects to date: the Sardar Sarovar megadam. In terms of using historiographic storytelling to write the displaced people of the Narmada Valley back in to history and to articulate their dependence on the land, Roy begins “The Greater Common Good” with an anecdote:

I stood on a hill and laughed out loud.

I had crossed the Narmada by boat from Jalsindhi and climbed the headland on the opposite bank, from where I could see, ranged across the crowns of low,

---

⁹ “The Greater Common Good” is just one example of her use of historiographic storytelling to bring political affairs to light. This technique can also be seen in the ample corpus of her nonfiction writing. For additional examples, see “The Great Indian Rape Trick” and “The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane,” which she wrote in 1993; “The End of Imagination” in 1998; The Algebra of Infinite Justice in 2002, Power Politics in 2002; War Talk in 2003; An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire and Public Power in the Age of Empire in 2004; Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy in 2009; and Broken Republic: Three Essays and Walking with the Comrades in 2011.
bald hills, the Adivasi hamlets of Sikka, Surung, Neemgavan, and Domkhedi. I could see their airy, fragile homes. I could see their fields and the forests behind them. I could see little children with littler goats scuttling across the landscape like motorized peanuts. I knew I was looking at a civilization older than Hinduism, slated—sanctioned (by the highest court in the land)—to be drowned this monsoon [1999], when the waters of the Sardar Sarovar reservoir will rise to submerge it. (7)

Already, Roy endeavors to connect the soon to be displaced Adivasi (or “the original inhabitants (indigenous people) of a region” [7]) to their rightful place in history by claiming that she “knew [she] was looking at a civilization older than Hinduism.” As the region’s most long-standing religion, Hinduism has been present in India well before there even was an India. (The country only officially gained its status as a nation sixty-four years ago in 1947.) The age-old system of beliefs has come to function as the shared values which essentially connect and define the people of this region and contribute to how they understand the world and themselves. However, by reimagining history to show the enduring existence of the Adivasi, Roy reconnects them to the past that is rightfully theirs. Moreover, in situating the Adivasi in an epoch earlier in Hinduism, Roy conveys to readers that it is not Hinduism that defines the Indian people, but rather a connection to the land that both forms and sustains them. Adivasis not only have ancient ties to the land but they also provide evidence for terrestrial identity formation—the influence that an intimate connection with the local environment has in the shaping of people’s senses of self and of their perceptions of the world around them. With this information, Roy begins to supply her readers with “a whole other dimension to the story” (18) that she tells. That is to say, she uses storytelling to complicate the traditional ways of thinking about equality and entitlement that
Indians, over a period of thousands and thousands of years, have come to accept as natural, as just the way things are.

Throughout “The Greater Common Good,” Roy capitalizes on the use of nontraditional form to help her reveal how the caste system serves to authorize the Indian government’s endeavors to control and exploit the nation’s people and its land. The nonlinear plot functions similarly to its use in The God of Small Things, as it reveals Roy’s contention that India’s caste system is one of the factors allowing for the unjust treatment of the people of the Narmada Valley. At one point, Roy tells a story of the atrocious conditions of the resettlement camps for the displaced people in an effort to reveal that the Indian government purposefully omits these people from the historical record in order to continue modernization. She then bends and reverses the narrative line in order to historicize Canada’s French and Indian War from 1757-1762 (also known as the Seven Year War in Canada [“The Battle of Quebec”]) in which Lord Jeffery Amherst—British commanding general during the latter half of the war—orchestrated the genocide of Canada’s Native Indians “by offering them blankets infested with the smallpox virus” (“Common Good” 20-1). Here, Roy implements historicization in order to make her readers see the not so obvious connections between Amherst’s actions and what the Indian government is doing to the undesirable stratum of Indian society by forcing them from their land and then flooding it “in the name of National Interest” (21).

In comparing Lord Amherst’s use of biological warfare against the Native Americans as a means to, as Amherst himself put it, “Bring about the Total Extirpation of those Indian Nations” (“Letter to Sir William Johnson”) to the Indian government’s use of dam-building to displace millions of Adivasis and Dalits (formerly known as “untouchables”), Roy aims to show how the Indian state has “found less obvious ways of achieving similar ends” (“Common Good” 21).
Granted, the powerful institution is not personally engaging in direct, physical violence against the Adivasi. Government forces are not openly slaughtering its people with shootouts, bombings, or germ warfare. Rather, the violence that local and state authorities inflict upon the powerless is indirect, and their intents are cleverly couched within the “inflated rhetoric” (30) of progress and development. Additionally, this history lesson serves to expose the part that caste politics plays in contributing to the unjust treatment of lower caste Indians.

The nation’s belief in the caste system is an example of the way an ideological framework becomes naturalized and used by the powerful as a means to control the powerless. Through what Louis Althusser calls a progression of ideological naturalization, people become subsumed by dominant ideologies and come to simply accept things as they are just because that is the way things are. Althusser claims that ideology is so obvious that it goes undetected:

> It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (loud or in the ‘still small voice of conscience’): ‘That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!’” (104)

Ideology works its magic by camouflaging itself so adroitly that it simply blends in with the background; many people, oblivious to the ideologies that shape their particular beliefs, live their lives assuming that their beliefs and values are unquestionable certainties. In terms of India’s caste system, so deft were the machinations of India’s dominant institutions (i.e. the government, the church, the state), no one was able to notice that what was happening to them was actually a carefully crafted scheme to make acts of domination and subjugation appear natural, as though life had always been that way.
This gradual acceptance of caste as the single most defining factor of an individual’s human worth and the cleverness of the Indian state to turn this belief into a powerful instrument of control prompts Roy to refer to the caste system as having “seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag” (GOST 33). The hegemonic and oppressive efforts of the dominant power structures did not happen overnight. Rather, their attempts to control the nation were insinuated bit by bit. As a result, the ideological framework presents itself as “always already” part of Indian life. However, the historiographic component to her writing works to poke holes in this ideology and unravel the authority of the caste system by making visible the typically invisible connections between power and powerlessness. For example, Roy’s storytelling reveals both the function of and the flaws with using caste to explain away the displacement of millions of Adivasis and Dalits. The ubiquitous, relentless power of caste politics allows upper-caste Indians to remain indifferent to the exploitation of the lower castes, thereby helping to keep government secrets from surfacing. In situating the displaced among the bottommost dregs of society, they become expendable and the destruction of their homes and land becomes acceptable and even martyred, seen as a sacrifice for the Greater Good of the nation: “‘Yes, it’s sad,’ [city dwellers] say. ‘But it can’t be helped. We need electricity.’” (Preface, The Cost of Living x). Roy’s storyline aims to rupture the ideological framework of caste by pointing out the flawed reasoning in using caste politics—disguised as the principle of the “Greater Common Good”—to warrant injustice. This valuation, she reveals, is simply a scheme used by the Indian state and global powers to further subjugate the powerless and to privatize the nation’s natural resources. In fact, her essay not only complicates the deep-rooted values of Hinduism, but also the more recent fabricated and inflated narratives of progress and development that world governments rely on to convince societies that what is being done is in the best interest of the nation or better yet, the world.
Roy pokes holes in these narratives by meticulously analyzing and deconstructing their rhetoric. Realizing that it could ride the wave of national pride and collectivity to garner support for the dam construction, the government began referring to the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project as the “People’s Dam” (“Common Good” 30). The World Bank (who provided the money to India for the megadam) also participated in excising the emotion from the atrocities it helped to commit by developing technical terms for the displaced, calling them “PAPs—Project Affected Persons.” As Roy proceeds to divulge, “They help, these acronyms, they manage to mutate blood and muscle and blood into cold statistics. PAPs soon cease to be people” (32). For the World Bank (a modern-day colonizer, according to Roy), whose “aiding” tentacles infiltrate numerous international projects, the disaffected language of acronyms and statistics works to sever any connections that it might have to the horrific outcomes of the projects that it funds. The fact that the Indian government employs this rhetoric to relinquish its own responsibility in the displacement of millions of people is an example of what anthropologist Alf Hornberg\textsuperscript{10} refers to as “the process by which local-interest groups appropriate the very discourse that subsumes them” (198). The appropriated rhetoric provides a way for the Indian state to write over the stories of those affected by modernization, and to instead highlight the nation’s development and progress in terms of global capitalism—a ploy that allows them to avoid admitting to the human or ecological costs that made possible the nation’s so-called advancement. To invalidate this rhetoric, Roy systematically dismantles the government’s emotionless, statistical language and uses storytelling to reconstruct the obvious emotional connection that the people of the Narmada valley have/had to their land and the impacts that the loss of it have on their sense of selves.

\textsuperscript{10}Hornberg’s analysis in “Undermining Modernity” investigates the attempts of the Mi’kmaq Indians of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia to stop the local company Kelly Rock from turning a symbolic and sacred mountain into a granite quarry and reveals that Mi’kmaq cultural identities are contingent upon both their connections to their history and their connections to their local environment.
As Roy tells these stories, she uses a nonlinear plot so that the essay’s narrative line, like the storyline in *The God of Small Things*, bends and reverses in order to deftly uncover information typically obscured by government rhetoric. Roy weaves her way between emotionless and factual accounts of the state of the nation’s economy—because “[w]hen we’re discussing the Greater Common Good there’s no place for sentiment. One must stick to facts” (“Common Good” 50)—to the detailed, poignant stories of the people who get reduced to acronyms and the land that gets converted into use value. Consider how she begins her essay with the anecdote of what she sees as she stands on the Hill overlooking the Narmada Valley, a tactic that instantly connects readers to the horror of the waterlogged fate that stands poised to destroy both people and place, then shifts to a process of questioning the dam-building project in an effort to determine “what is really going on in the Narmada valley” (9). As a case in point, she begins a section of her essay with a statistical analysis of India’s food production to illustrate how the nation has increased their grain production by nearly 150 million tons from 1950 to 1995. However, in order to breathe life into lifeless statistics, Roy uses historiographic storytelling to restore what she sees to be the obvious personal and emotional implications that exists behind the numbers. Due to their low socioeconomic statuses as Adivasis and Dalits, her narrative reveals, the individuals who live in the Narmada valley “are too poor to buy the food their country produces.” In order to make a living, Adivasis and Dalits depend on the fertile river valley to “grow the kinds of food they can’t afford to eat themselves” (22). The irony of this situation, reveals Roy, is that although India’s granaries hold a surplus that they then sell to foreign companies, the nation’s own people are starving (22). These constant shifts in the narrative allow her to both connect the perpetrators to their crimes of displacement and ecological ruination and to make real the stories of those victims of injustice.
To bolster her charges that the Indian state and the global world markets must be held accountable for their misdeeds, Roy brings into evidence the stories of those who have been displaced and of the land that has been ruined, providing readers with specific proof of “the real cost of production” (“Common Good” 16). Her stories of the people of the river valley reveal that they have suffered terrible emotional and physical losses. For the Adivasis and the Dalits of the valley, the land with “beautiful, broad-leaved forests and perhaps the most fertile agricultural land in India” (25) is the source of their livelihoods. It is how they eke out an existence in a nation that, Roy contends, does not want them to exist. However, what the Sardar Sarovar project has done is decimate the land and the river the Adivasis and Dalits have come to depend upon. Dam construction has resulted in the felling of forests that obstruct the dam’s path, “forcing people who depended on them for a livelihood to move out” (49). Those who live near the Bargi dam and customarily relied on the fertile silt banks of the river to grow crops of rice and vegetables during the dry months, can no longer trust the river that they used to know so well because “[e]very now and then, the engineers manning the Bargi dam (way upstream in Jabalpur) release water from the reservoir without warning” (49). As a result, “[h]undreds of families have had their crops washed away several times, leaving them with no livelihood” (50).

For Roy, who perceives an incontrovertible connection between a people and their land, “the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing” (50). In fact, her use of the word “aching” signifies that the Narmada is as much a part of the people as are their own corporeal and emotional selves. Her language works to show how the people of the valley have an intimate, interdependent relationship with nature. They physically feel the pain of its loss in their battered, emaciated bodies, which can no longer be nourished by the river’s bounty. Moreover, the people of the river valley experience the excruciating emotional pain at the loss of their river, as though they
have lost a vital part of themselves. Ultimately, destroying a river and land subsequently destroys
the people who, over years and years, have come to identify with their local environment.
Without the natural resources that sustain them physically and emotionally, they become a
broken people with nothing left to rely on but the very government that has ruined them. As
Roy’s story of the displaced reveals,

Once that’s [the breaking of a people] done, what do they [the broken and
displaced] have left? Only you [the powerful]. They will turn to you, because
you’re all they have left. They will love you even while they despise you. They
will trust you even though they know you well. They will vote for you even as
you squeeze the very breath from their bodies. They will drink what you give
them to drink. They will breathe what you give them to breathe. They will live
where you dump their belongings. They have to. What else can they do? There’s
no higher court of redress. You are their mother and their father. You are the
judge and the jury. You are the World. You are God. (79-80).

With each connection that Roy makes between the actions of the powerful and the injustices that
those actions mete out on the powerless, she works to place the blame and the responsibility for
the destruction back in the hands of its rightful perpetrators—the global and state governments
and world markets.

Granted, Roy’s writing is polemical. She completely overstates her case and makes no
attempt to couch her bias. However, polemics are not meant to be objective. As cultural critic
Laura Kipnis claims in her book Against Love: A Polemic, the purpose of a polemic is “to poke
holes in cultural pieties and turn received wisdom on its head” (390). For Kipnis, polemics
provide a valuable social function in that they work “to shake things up and rattle a few
convictions” (390). That is to say, when “the usual story” or the dominant ideology becomes so firmly entrenched that no one thinks to question it, then a good polemic might be just the thing to “shake things up.” Telling the stories of the people of the Narmada Valley using a polemical stance allows Roy to do just that—to expose the hidden intents in the government’s rhetoric and to turn conventional wisdom about India’s caste system on its head. In revealing the ways that local, state, and global powers achieve modernization by exploiting and manipulating a nation’s people and its land, she forces her readers to reconsider the verity of the stories told to them by dominant institutions as well as to reexamine their own established belief systems.

Just like in The God of Small Things, Roy uses historiographic storytelling in “The Greater Common Good,” to rewrite the displaced people of the Narmada Valley back into history and to establish the profound influence that a connection to one’s local environment has on one’s identity formation. In fact, because her fiction and her nonfiction both work to achieve similar ends, her writing cannot and should not be separated from one another. Roy herself has stated numerous times that she does not see a difference between her fiction and her nonfiction. Furthermore, Aarthi Vadde claims that “[t]he absurdity of dividing Roy’s writing from her activism and her fiction from her nonfiction is evident not only from The God of Small Things’s thematic indictment of globalization and the Kerala tourism industry, but also from its formal strategies that disturb the anthropocentric hierarchies of value implicit in narrative” (538). For Vadde, Roy’s fiction and nonfiction not only move to produce the same ends but also interrupt and subsequently reset traditional environmental narratives that depict nature as a device to be used for man’s personal gain—for the “pursuit of human ascendancy” she says to quote The God of Small Things. I grant that Vadde provides a compelling and successful argument that Roy’s

---

11 See David Barsamian’s The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile and his “Interview with Arundhati Roy.” Roy has also stated this in her own writing. See “Come September.”
fiction and nonfiction should not be separated on the basis that each are advocating a shift from the current anthropocentric views of nature to one focused on biocentrism. However, I still maintain that *The God of Small Things* and Roy’s nonfiction writing are one in the same as a result of the element of historicization to lay bare the interconnected web of who is doing what to whom and why. With this information made public and readily accessible to everyone in the world, Roy believes, it can then be used by human and environmental rights activists to subvert the injustices inflicted upon the powerless by the powerful, which in turn, yokes the concerns of postcolonialism and environmentalism.
CHAPTER THREE: “We have to fight specific wars in specific ways”: Historicization, Environmental Justice, and Arundhati Roy

_The time has come, the Walrus said. Perhaps things will get worse and then better. Perhaps there’s a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she’s on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing._

—Arundhati Roy, “Come September”

As Rob Nixon claims in his 2005 essay “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism,” one of the key areas of disagreement between postcolonialists and environmentalists is the issue of historicization, as postcolonialism works to reconstruct the histories of marginalized and displaced people, while environmental writing tends to ignore or even erase these histories by invoking “the myth of the empty lands” (235). Nixon suggests that engaging in “comparative international readings” (245), which would examine works in the two typically disparate critical genres alongside one another, could bridge the gap between the two methodologies. Following Nixon’s advice, I read Arundhati Roy’s fiction and nonfiction comparatively, arguing that the historiographic component to her storytelling in both _The God of Small Things_ and her nonfiction essays functions as the connective tissue that binds postcolonialism and environmentalism. However, my initiative to use Roy’s writing to unite postcolonialism and ecocriticism is not unique, for postcolonial scholar Aarthi Vadde has also engaged in a similar undertaking. In her 2009 article “The Backwaters Sphere: Ecological Collectivity, Cosmopolitanism, and Arundhati Roy,” Vadde labors to situate Roy’s writing at the juncture of cosmopolitanism and ecocriticism in order to show that Roy is advocating for “terrestrial cosmopolitanism,” a concept that nullifies the division between humans and nature and “replaces collectivity based on shared humanity with collectivity based on the cross-species relations of particular ecologies” (529). In both Roy’s fiction and nonfiction, Vadde sees Roy as condemning anthropocentric concepts of nature.
and instead promoting “a more ethical vision of political and cultural belonging” (536) through what Vadde refers to as the “backwater sphere”—the locus of “ecological collectivity” in which both humans and nonhumans coexist in a communal space with mutual respect for one another and the human pursuit of ascendancy is tempered (524-5).

Vadde’s theory of “terrestrial cosmopolitanism” is invaluable to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism, because it provides significant points of overlap between the two methodologies. As Nixon claims, in addition to the problem of historicization, “postcolonial studies has tended to favor the cosmopolitan and the transnational. Postcolonialists are typically critical of nationalism, whereas the canons of environmental literature and criticism have developed within a national (and often nationalistic) American framework” (235). Taking Nixon’s suggestion to engage in comparative international readings, Vadde reads Roy’s writing alongside that of German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose anthropocentric understandings of nature have been used as the foundation for cosmopolitanism. Through her comparative, transnational reading, Vadde is able to widen the scope of cosmopolitanism, which characteristically propositions that all humans—regardless of race, nationality, or ethnicity—share an essential connection with one another through a system of universal values12, to also include the environment, or nonhumans, as she puts it. In so doing, she yokes postcolonialism to environmentalism, positing that both humans and nonhumans are bound by shared ethics and mutual appreciation for life and all its forms.

In terms of my own study of Roy, while similar to Vadde’s argument in purpose—I, too, am attempting to use a comparative reading of Roy as a bridge between postcolonialism and ecocriticism—it differs in theory, for I focus on the element of historicization in Roy’s writing as

---

12 For more on the theory of cosmopolitanism, see Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in A World of Strangers*.
what links the two methodologies together. Roy’s historiographic storytelling constructs corporeal and topographical palimpsests, which serve as physical evidence of the consequences of globalization, for looking at the altered forms of India’s people and its land spark a recollection of what each was like before. By juxtaposing the current, ravaged conditions of the nation’s physical and terrestrial bodies with their former appearances, Roy draws attention to the terrible injustices meted out upon the India’s people and its environment as a result of globalization. She uses her writing to not only bring these civil and terrestrial injustices to light, but also advocate for social and environmental change. Both her fiction and her nonfiction can be seen as poignant petitions for environmental justice that call for the fair and equitable treatment of both people and place. Through her writing, she proposes that a way to combat the oppressive, all-consuming force of globalism is for humans to “fight specific wars in specific ways” (“Common Good” 12). That is, for people to be made aware of the particulars surrounding globalization—Who gets to make the decisions and why? Who is affected by the decisions and why? What information is being concealed and why? Armed with the answers to these questions, Roy believes that those who have been powerless will be able to wage war against the powerful, and to ultimately achieve civil and terrestrial rights.

In both The God of Small Things and “The Greater Common Good,” Roy’s writing shows how the original physiognomies of body and land have been overwritten, partially erased by the postcolonial nation’s drive to successfully modernize and develop according to Western standards. Once lush, green forests and clear, sparkling waters have been reduced to desolate wastelands and polluted rivers in order to make way for dam construction and petroleum and chemical production. As a result of this move towards industrialization, the Indian people also bear the scars of the Western conception of progress. And yet, the original images and functions
of both people and land can remain, because, as Richard Hemmings suggests in his 2007 essay “Landscape as Palimpsest: Wordsworthian Topography in the War Writings of Blunden and Sassoon,” the “meanings from previous periods continue to resonate in the superimposed definition that has only partially erased them” (280). Thus, these physical and geographical transformations serve as constant reminders of the exploitation and marginalization that globalization has and continues to mete out on the people as well as on the environment in newly developed nations.

To convey the corporeal changes of India’s people, in *The God of Small Things*, Roy tells the story of the Cochin Harbor Terminus circa 1969, the year that the Indian government, struggling to reach an agreement with the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra on a water-sharing formula for the then proposed Narmada Valley Dam Project, “set up the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal” (“Common Good” 25-6). As Ammu and Rahel wait with Estha before the Madras Mail Returns him to his father in Calcutta, Roy shifts the narrative line in order to describe the terminal. The station overflows with evidence of the human costs of modernization, teeming with “[s]currying hurrying buying selling luggage trundling porter paying children shitting people spitting coming going begging bargaining reservation-checking” (*GOST* 284). A morass of consumerism and exploitation, the terminal functions as a space in which the consequences of the “vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation” (20) can be seen inscribed on the bodies of a nation’s people. It is a space where local, state, and global initiatives to modernize intersect with the private lives of the Indian people in painful, disfiguring ways. There are “[g]aunt children, blond with malnutrition, selling smutty magazines and food they couldn’t afford to eat themselves” (284). There are
“[h]ollow people. Homeless. Hungry. Still touched by last year’s famine” (285). As the narrator continues, he or she describes

A blind man without eyelids and eyes as blue as faded jeans, his skin pitted with smallpox scars, chatted to a leper without fingers, taking dexterous drags from scavenged cigarette stubs that lay beside him in a heap.

“What about you? When did you move here?”

As though they had had a choice. As though they had picked this for their home from a vast array of posh housing estates listed in a glossy pamphlet. (285)

That Roy specifically says the men are homeless, living in the terminal through no choice of their own, alludes to the likely possibility that they have been displaced by one of the many dam-building projects occurring in postcolonial India. After gaining independence, the nation needed “to prove itself that it was modern. To enter the comity of nations, India had to be educated, united, outward-looking, and above all, industrialized” (Guha, India after Ghandi, 211). While dams served as one of the definitive symbols of modernization, the human casualties of advancement could be seen everywhere throughout the nation. With this brief story of these disabled men, Roy reminds readers of the human costs of development and invokes a palimpsestuous awareness of their physical conditions. As readers picture the emaciated, ravaged bodies of these individuals, they simultaneously situate these people in an earlier time in history in order to envision how they may have looked before displacement and poverty (all in the name of national progress) so drastically altered their physical forms. Thus, images of their once healthy bodies forever exist beneath their present states of disfigurement, perpetually reminding readers of the haunting effects of modernization.
Likewise, in “The Greater Common Good,” Roy uses storytelling to conjure up palimpsestuous images of the people and the land of the Narmada Valley before and after construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam. Through the portraiture of individuals like the man she met in a resettlement site near Baroda, Roy illustrates the devastating effects—physical, emotional, terrestrial—that dam construction inflicts on the displaced. Although his child was terribly sick and his family was visibly starving, “[t]he man’s mind was far away” envisioning “the fruit he used to pick” in the now submerged forest he used to call home (53). Roy’s storytelling reveals how globalism has superimposed a layer of disability onto the once healthy bodies of both the displaced people and Narmada river valley. Forever etched in these people’s minds will be the way that they used to live and to be, the way that their surroundings used to look, and the bounty that the land used to yield. Roy’s palimpsestic location of both people and place provides a painful, perpetual memory of life before modernization and illustrates the importance that she attaches to both history and environment in the formation of a sense of self.

The stories that Roy tells about the impairment and disfigurement of both the Indian people and the nation’s land can be seen as proof of what anthropologist Dee Mack Williams refers to as “corporeal ramifications of globalization, especially overt connections among changes in land use, health, and body idiom” (763). In “Grazing the Body: Violations of Land and Limb in Inner Mongolia,”13 Williams argues that modernization and globalization are directly linked to the “selective degeneration of both land […] and body” (763). William’s contention can also be applied to the situation in India. Since gaining its independence in 1947, India has become one of the fastest growing economies in the world (USDA). However, much of this economic prosperity has been gained at the expense of its own people and its land.

Roy uses historicization as a means to indict globalization for its disfigurement of India’s corporeal and terrestrial bodies, for the palimpsestuous quality of her narratives invoke images of the past to be juxtaposed with the present. Thus, Roy’s storytelling forces readers to imagine these bodies as they once existed in history while simultaneously thinking of them as they exist in the present, a tactic that works to continuously remind the reader of the human and environmental costs of globalization. In an effort to provide a useful definition for this rather complex term, I turn to critic Lisa Lowe in *Keywords for American Culture* who defines globalization as “a contemporary term used in academic and non-academic contexts to describe a late-twentieth-century condition of economic, social, and political interdependence across cultures, societies, nations, and regions precipitated by an unprecedented expansion of capitalism on a global scale” (120). Lowe goes on to say that there is a problem with this usage: “it obscures a much longer history of global contacts and connections” (120). Since World War II, the United States has ascended into a global hub of capitalism. With the onset of decolonization, the U.S. embarked on many projects based in third-world nations that, according Roy, are presented under false pretexts of fostering “a level playing field and the equitable distribution of resources” in order to create a “better world” (qtd in Barsamian 55-6). However, the aims of globalization also have palimpsestuous qualities: beneath the primary claims that globalization creates a free-market that promotes neoliberalism and free trade, lie the hidden agenda of dominant nations such as the U.S., France, and Indonesia who seek to exploit less powerful, less developed nations in order to maintain their cultural hegemony. Therefore, while globalization has certainly contributed to the restructuring of the world’s political, social, and economic structures, it has also adversely transformed the world’s population, landscape, and environment—connections that Roy makes visible through historiographic storytelling.
In her writing, Roy reveals the commonality between the intents and effects of globalization and colonization, using historicization to demonstrate how the two work to achieve the same ends—domination and control of the world’s people and its ecosystem in order to make a profit. In fact, a popular position in the debate over globalization is that “globalization is a form of cultural imperialism that has eroded nation-states and flattened natural cultural differences through the vast spread of consumerism” (Lowe 121). In Soil Not Oil, Indian activist and author Vandana Shiva argues that not only is the nation’s culture eroded, but also its environment. Shiva explains that in order to meet the increasing global demand for steel, aluminum, sponge iron, automobiles, and petro-chemicals, dominant Western nations outsource the production of these industrial products to developing countries like India. Shiva refers to this practice as “eco-imperialism,” a term that refers to the Western world’s “control over the economies of the world through corporate globalization” (16). This practice “transforms the resources and ecosystems of the world into feedstock for an industrialized globalized economy. […] And it refers to the attempts to engineer the planet” (17, emphasis added). Thus, corporate globalization, which “allow[s] corporations to gain increasing control of the earth’s resources” so as “to continue to run the industrialized global economy” (15), is crippling not only India’s land and environment but also the Indian people in order to turn a profit.

The repercussions of corporate globalization become corporeally evident when we are confronted with the disfigured bodies of the people and the landscapes of countries in which “the burden of global industrial production is now falling” (Shiva 33). Relating this theory back to Roy’s writing, the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in India was methodically calculated, built in what Lawrence Summers, chief economist of the World Bank in 1991, refers to as “the LDC [Less Developed Countries]” (qtd in Shiva 33). Shiva goes on to explain that these
countries are ideal locations for “destructive and polluting economic activities” because they already experience high illness and mortality rates and, most importantly, “since the poor are poor, they cannot possibly worry about environmental problems” (34). In terms of dam construction, Roy explains that in powerful nations such as the United States, dams have fallen out of favor due to the realization that “they do more harm than good” (14). However, while dam construction in the U.S. has ceased, “the dam-building industry in the First World is in trouble and out of work. So it’s exported to the Third World in the name of Development Aid, along with their other waste, like old weapons, superannuated aircraft carriers, and banned pesticides” (15). American corporations and the Indian elite that they partner with—the “S. Kumars (textile tycoons turned nation-builders)” [57] conveniently ignore the destructive after-effects of dam-building in order to continue making a profit. Moreover, the Indian government portrays the devastation as an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product of modernization. However, in writing “The Greater Common Good,” Roy displays a refusal to accept this line of thinking as a legitimate explanation. Instead, she works to expose the both the United States and Indian governments’ negligence, repeatedly indicating that because the people who are in need of help are Dalits and Adivasis, members of India’s lowest, poorest social classes, it is easier (even permissible) for these powerful institutions to exploit them.

Roy reveals in “The Greater Common Good” that the Indian government engaged in the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project so as to contribute to the modernization and economic prosperity of the nation. Likewise, in The God of Small Things, she discloses that similar motivations were in play when the local government of Kerala—“in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby”—constructed a saltwater barrage” that “regulated the inflow from the backwaters [of Kerala’s Meenachal River] that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a
year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river” (118). This is a prime example of Roy’s conviction in “The Greater Common Good” that the Indian State “has been ruthlessly efficient in the way it has appropriated India’s resources—its land, its water, its forests, its fish, its meat, its eggs, its air—and redistributed them to a favored few (in return, no doubt, for a few favors)” [23]. Additionally, the river’s manipulation coupled with the pollution of “unadulterated factory effluents” have reduced a body of water that once “had the power to evoke fear” and “[t]o change lives” to “a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried garbage to the sea” (GOST 119). Yet, in The God of Small Things, Roy juxtaposes the squalid Meenachal River in 1992 with the formidable, rushing river of Rahel and Estha’s childhood during the 1960s so that readers are forced to think of one in terms of the other, thereby highlighting the role that globalism plays in the destruction of a nation’s environment.

By creating these corporeal and terrestrial palimpsests, Roy aims to first get her readers to understand what she considers to be the grave and dangerous consequences of modernity, of “human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy” (GOST 292-3). Not only does she use storytelling in an effort to force her readers to think about things according to her terms, but she also employs historicization to present them with poignant petitions for environmental justice. According to Joan Martinez-Alier in The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation, environmental justice is a movement that “fights for minority groups and against environmental racism in the USA” (13). Environmental racism occurs when powerful organizations exploit geographical areas in which people of low socioeconomic status reside. These spaces get used as dumping grounds for toxic waste, as sites for harmful chemical and pesticide production, as oil and strip mining locations, and locations for dam-building. Because the people making the decisions as to where these harmful and destructive activities will take
place are typically thousands of miles away from the point of contact, environmental racism can be seen as a prime example of Roy’s idea that the distance between power and powerlessness, between those who take decisions and those who have to suffer the decisions, has increased enormously. It’s a perilous journey for the poor—it’s a pitfall filled with overflowing lies, brutality, and injustice. Sitting in Washington or Geneva in the offices of the World Bank or the WTO, bureaucrats have the power to decide the fate of millions. […] The further and further away geographically decisions are taken, the more scope you have for incredible injustice. (qtd. in Checkbook 14)

Environmental justice works to close the distance between power and powerlessness by fighting for the civil and terrestrial rights of these disadvantaged and marginalized peoples and regions. The movement connects the dots between “those who take decisions and those who have to suffer the decisions,” making visible the lengths that the powerful will go to exploit and profit from the powerless. Though currently a movement in the United States, as Martinez-Alier notes, the campaign has the potential to branch outward into developing nations that are continuously exploited and victimized by corporate globalization.

In several instances throughout “The Greater Common Good,” Roy states that “[w]e have to fight specific wars in specific ways” (12). For her, the war facing Modern India is “an unacknowledged war” (21), and the specific way to fight it is with “specific facts about specific issues” (10). This, to her, is the people of India’s “most effective weapon” (10), for awareness of what is going on can lead to movements to try to stop it, such as India’s Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)—the nation’s social movement against the Sardar Sarovar Dam. The weapon of local, state, and global government, Roy contends, is concealment: “The way it manages to keep
its secrets, to contain information—that vitally concerns the daily lives of one billion people” (23). Admittedly, she says, most people are unwilling to look beneath surface, beneath the shiny exterior of the government’s “inflated rhetoric” (30), in order to fully understand the particulars. Yet, this is exactly what Roy achieves with her writing. Roy’s use of historiographic storytelling in both her fiction and her nonfiction allows her to make visible the typically invisible connections between routinely isolated historical and political events, and both the people and the landscapes that are drastically affected by the postcolonial nation’s drive to successfully modernize and develop according to Western standards. She provides readers with the information that she believes is integral to the success of environmental justice—of the implementation of civil and terrestrial rights on a transnational level and not just for the nations who currently dominate political, economic, and global markets.

What my comparative reading of Roy’s fiction and nonfiction means for postcolonialism and ecocriticism is that the two methodologies can be bridged through the historicization. Reimagining history through historiographic storytelling is the key to “connect[ing] the very smallest things to the very biggest: whether it’s the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom” (Roy qtd. in Checkbook 11). Roy uses her writing to provide Indians with the ability to situate themselves in a history that is their own and to encourage a connection with the land that should and must sustain them. What is more important, The God of Small Things and her nonfiction structurally achieve the same ends, which are to use the connections uncovered through historiography as, to use Vadde’s words, “weapons against the bedfellows of global capitalism and state control” (522). Reading Roy’s writing from postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives provide readers with an awareness of the negative
effects that the modernization and globalism mete out on the Indian people and its land.
Understanding how and why dominant state and global forces simultaneously work to excise the local people from their land in order to make a profit and then subsequently erase the displaced from history in order to protect and perpetuate globalism closes the geographical “distance between power and powerlessness.”

Not only do her narratives of connection expose the concealment schemes used by local, state, and global forces to perpetuate environmental racism, but they also provide opportunities for social and environmental justice movements to make advancements for civil and terrestrial rights. For Roy, Modern India is embroiled in an “unacknowledged war” between the small gods—people, nature, and the environment—and the Big Gods—the large, pervasive forces that work to control how people see and how they are seen. The most valuable weapon for the small gods to obtain and to use in their battle with the Big Gods is knowledge—the awareness of “specific facts about specific issues” (10). This specific information is what Roy provides in her narratives of connection. In so doing, she is working to arm the people of India with knowledge that could be used to radically shift the balance of power. The time to fight this “unacknowledged war” is now, she advises. For too long the Indian people (and, undeniably, the rest of the world) have been reluctant “to dig too deep” (23). People, herself included, “don’t really want to know the grisly details,” Roy confesses. Yet this awareness, however painful (and it is always painful to become cognizant of the flaws in an ideology), is the only way for people to gain footing in a war that is only visible to those waging it—accessible only to the keepers of the flame: ministers, bureaucrats, state engineers, defense strategists” (23). For Roy, knowledge is power and that all people—due to civil rights—deserve access to it is why she uses her writing to tell stories that expose how dominant forces ascended to their powerful positions and how
they have played starring roles in the suppression, oppression, and exploitation of the uninformed people who are powerless to stop them. While such a restructuring will certainly take considerable time and initiative, she concedes, and most of the people of the present generation “won’t be here to greet her” (“Come September” 75), Roy’s writing provides readers with hope that one day, civil and terrestrial justice may be attained.
WORKS CITED


