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► **To cite this version:**

Catherine Pessa-Miquel. Killing the joy of language: Arundhati Roy's depiction of childhood in *The God of Small Things*. *Cycnos*, 2017, Voyage vers la parole. *L'Enfant, les Sens, l'Acquisition du Langage*, 33 (1), pp.173-188. hal-03163811

**HAL Id: hal-03163811**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03163811>**

Submitted on 1 Jun 2021

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## **Killing the joy of language: Arundhati Roy's depiction of childhood in *The God of Small Things***

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*The God of Small Things* was published in 1997, the same year as John Burnside's harrowing novel *The Dumb House*, subtitled "A chamber novel", in which a psychopath experiments on his own baby twins, bringing them up in absolute isolation and silence, to prevent the "voyage towards words" of infancy. In Roy's novel, twins are also subjected to such horror<sup>1</sup> that one of them totally "stop[s] talking altogether," not suddenly, but in a "gradual winding down and closing shop" (Roy 10). But Roy's literary representation of twinhood is very different, allowing for comic relief and variety, and a complex rendering of what Henry James calls "the close connection of bliss and bale" in his preface of *What Maisie Knew* (James 5): Roy holds tragedy and comedy, imagination and gritty realism, irony and empathy, in a constant, precious balance, but they can never be simplistically contrasted, since one event or one motif can very well be Janus-faced. Roy's depiction of childhood, an important aspect of this work, is also informed by that reversibility and complexity; in other words the opposition between childhood and adulthood in Roy's novel cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between innocence and experience.

Jan Mc Girk noted that Roy would not "admit to any literary heroes or influences, other than Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*" (McGirk 3). Indeed when one rereads Lee's novel as refracted through *The God of Small Things* many interesting parallels and patterns stand out. Lee's novel is a fictitious autobiography written by an adult concentrating on past events, privileging the point of view and idiom of the child she used to be, but also allowing adult reflections and language to colour the narrative, or create distance and irony. Roy's novel is told differently, by a heterodiegetic narrator using various focalisers and a degree of

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a constant hypotext in *The God of Small Things*, in which the phrase "the Terror" echoes Kurtz's famous exclamation, "The horror, the horror!" uttered by an "ivory face" bearing an (oxymoronic) expression "of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror" (Conrad 177).

ventriloquism. Henry James famously chose little Maisie as a “reflector,” but he refused to narrate the novel in her voice, because, as he put it, the vision of children is “much richer”, and “their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary” (James 7). Roy does not condescend in such a way to childish language: on the one hand, when she lets us hear the voice of her small characters, mostly in dialogues, she rarely makes this voice conventionally and mimetically childish, because her child-characters are extremely “old-fashioned” (in the dialectal sense); on the other hand she often allows a child-like idiom and vision to seep into the heterodiegetic narrative, blurring the boundaries between the “ages of man”.

This paper examines how Roy’s twins acquire two languages within a family that constantly attempts to control their usage of words, so that they soon become aware of the subversive and liberating force of a language that is not a mere parroting of others’ speech forms but a constant re-invention. This in turn becomes a metaphor for the poetic licence of the narrative voice, the voice of a free Indian woman using (and playfully abusing) English as she wills, defying both the unwritten rules of literary “good taste” and those diktats of post-colonial conventional wisdom that demand “authenticity.”

### **Authorised convention, unauthorised licence**

Both Estha and Rahel, before “the Terror<sup>2</sup>,” take great delight in the intricacies and potentialities of language. Their use of language, creative and subversive, is truly poetic, making them scorn conventions and the rigidity of the proper usage expected of them, especially in English, but this implies a battle of wills against a form of censorship. When Baby Kochamma, slyly eavesdropping, catches the twins speaking Malayalam, she “levies a small fine” on their pocket money (36). Only English is authorised, especially when an unacknowledged competition with “the real thing” (Sophie Mol) is at stake. English has to be correct and codified, and Chacko even chides his sister for not using Oxonian slang properly: “You don’t *go* to Oxford. You *read* at Oxford” (56). Ammu herself is not exempt from such linguistic snobbery; she is eager to see her children provide “a smooth performance” “in the Indo-British Behaviour Competition” (145). Hence her “Far More Angry Than

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<sup>2</sup> The capitalized word is used by the narrator to designate the traumatic event that triggers Estha’s aphasia, culminating in the deadly violence unleashed on their Untouchable friend Velutha, who was also their mother’s lover.

Necessary feeling” when Estha answers Margaret’s formal “How d’you do, Esthappen?” with a “sullen” “Finethankyou”, not a “How d’you do? back” (145). The narrator implies that Estha’s stubborn and mute opposition intuitively denounces the sterility of such class-connoted codes. Sophie Mol also tries to impose her own codes when she corrects Estha’s use of the word “dinner”: “Supper, silly.” The narrative voice, colluding with the rebellious twins to mock Sophie, turns the latter’s admonition to mimetic doggerel: “At *supper silly*, the children sat at a separate smaller table” (329).

The theme of censorship and the imposition of a codified mode of expression ties in with the more general idea of frowning upon children’s (and adults’) spontaneous outbreaks of expression, as when Estha bursts into song in the cinema, causing cartoon-like faces to swivel round in protest: “Hissing mouths with teeth like sharks. Many of them. Like stickers on a card” (100). The censorship is summed up by the narrative voice in two neat, chiasmic phrases: “Shutup or Getout. Getout or Shutup” (100).

Roy and her characters delight in a disrespectful, “incorrect” use of the English language that has already been analysed at length by several critics (see for instance Baneth-Nouailhetas 105-115 or Ganapathy-Dore 75-78). It is probably this insistence on creativity and on a refusal of norms and codes which distinguishes the representation of childhood in *The God of Small Things* from other literary attempts to create childish voices. Hugo Hamilton in *The Speckled People* chose a homodiegetic childish narrator whose language is characterised by a deliberately simple syntax and a limited vocabulary, even when the character grows to the age of eleven or twelve. Emma Donoghue, to create the illusion that the story in her novel *Room* is told by a five-year old, chose the immediacy of a child’s voice speaking in the present tense<sup>3</sup>. In the personal comments that follow the novel, she declares that she restricted herself to a language characterised by grammatical errors commonly made by children learning to speak: “I made myself a dictionary of my son’s kid-English, then narrowed it down to some classic errors and grammatical oddities that would not seriously confuse readers.” The result is funny, moving, and sometimes more inventive than what the author’s discourse

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<sup>3</sup> Not an inner monologue but an ongoing, immediate narrative, complete with dialogues as if the boy were telling his own story to himself as it unfolds, thus snapping shut the fan which in autobiography opens a distancing gap between narrating I and narrated I.

can lead us to expect, as when Jack uses the phrase “I waterfall the milk” or describes his “Meltedy Spoon” (Donoghue 4).

### Relishing words

However, Arundhati Roy is not interested in creating a mimetic, credible childish idiom based on “classic errors”; in fact she prefers to deploy a much greater creative playfulness, putting the stress on what Salman Rushdie calls “newness,” “change-by-fusion,” “change-by-conjoining” (Rushdie 394). Roy’s childish characters have a passion for words and language, which they taste, savour, and delight in. Not for them the jaded, ungrateful Structuralist grumpiness about the inadequacy of language or about the unsatisfactory relationship between signifier and signified: on the contrary they retain, as adults, their capacity to *wonder* at the magic and endless power of language. Thus the adult Rahel is struck by the sudden strangeness of a familiar word: “What a funny word *old* was on its own, Rahel thought, and said it to herself: *Old.*” (92). To each word belongs a physiognomy, a character, a mood: *twinkle* is “a word with crinkled, happy edges”, unsuitable to express the blinking, indifferent gaze of the Earth Woman (54), whereas the phrase *Jolly Well* is pictured by the seven-year-old Rahel as “a deeply well with larfing dead people in it” (148). This description defies grammatical and spelling conventions, underlining how sinister joviality can become when signifier and signified become distorted by usage, irony, or tone of voice.

The twins’ erratic spelling sometimes causes a clash between the oral and the written signifiers: when Chacko gravely mentions “Infinite joy”, little Rahel, used to seeing the family Plymouth as a shark with “tailfins” (35), mentally writes the adjective as *infinnate*, “like a sad fish with fins all over” (118). As Jean-Pierre Durix puts it,

[Roy’s] novel betrays her fascination for a language in which words are never transparent, self-evident, but always viewed from a slight distance, somehow exposed to the speaker’s scrutiny like strange objects in a glass-case display. This characteristic is no doubt related to the fact that much of the novel echoes the particular modes of childhood vision. (Durix 16)

Roy’s inventiveness involves playing with grammatical categories, the creation of neologisms, the pairing of words and affect, the conjoining and fusion of oral and written language. In *The God of Small*

*Things*, one of the main themes is the blurring of boundaries, and what is remarkable is that the freshness and vividness of the twins' language constantly "leaks" or "drip"<sup>4</sup> into the narrator's language, infusing it with vigour and originality, and often causing character voice and narrative voice to become inextricable.

Never taking words for granted, the twins are capable of querying the wisdom of using words like "bellhop" and "bellboy" as synonyms: "the bellboy who took them up wasn't a boy and hadn't a bell" (Roy 114). Sophie Mol, to whom her father introduces "My aunt, Baby" is comically "puzzled" because "she knew of cow babies and dog babies" but "*aunt* babies confounded her" (144). The very blanks that enable words to become entities can be abolished to create a "new" word capable of satisfyingly mimicking the very action it designates, like *sudden* and *shudder* in the "suddenshudder of the cold puppy" (15).

The verb "burst" gives birth to the comical invented adjective "bursty" (137), "wart," a noun, to an adjective, "warty" (187), chocolates become "melty" (98) and kangaroos move "cemently" (139). Linguistic inventiveness can express a joyful mood, but also the intensity of pain and fear, as when Ammu's eyes turn "a redly dead" (31) or when the nauseous Estha "walks *weavily* to the bathroom" (119, my emphasis): this alliterative phrase displays a coined adverb which functions as a rich portmanteau, suggesting the "heaving" of vomiting, the lassitude of "wearily," and the dead metaphor of "weaving one's way." In Sophie's "Brass handle shined" coffin (4), in Estha's "Elvis Presley-puffed" appearance (2), in the phrase "soapbubbled water" (194), an intransitive verb or a noun impossibly and defiantly give birth to a past participle. Roy's playfulness "irresistibly evokes the use of nonsense made by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll" (Durix 16). One can only concur with Durix when reading sentences like "Lace flowers and a lucky leaf bloomed on a black back" (Roy 178) or "Sophie squatted down in the well-squelch" (186). The influence of Carroll's "Jabberwocky" poem is certainly palpable in the following excerpt: "Happy earthworms frolicked purple in the slush. Green nettles nodded" (10).

Durix's comments however make it clear that in analysing Roy's uncanny verbal ability to conjure up *childishness*, it is almost impossible to separate voice from perception; in other words, creating the illusion of a childish apprehension of the world means working not only on how

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<sup>4</sup> An image borrowed from Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: Saleem uses it to explain his metafictional theories to Padma (Rushdie 2006, 44-45).

children speak but on how they feel and *perceive*. The twins' imagination, fed by the fictional worlds of cartoons, comic strips, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, the cinema, constantly creates a meaningful visual imagery which also "contaminates" the narrator's voice and the vision of the adult characters. Thus when the adult Rahel meets bare-chested Pillai, she comically perceives his nipples as a gaze, "peeping at her over the top of the boundary wall like a sad St Bernard's eyes" (129). The "skyblue Plymouth," almost a character unto itself, resembles an animal in a zoo (70), "a car-shaped herbivore" of which Rahel forms "the loose, flailing horn" (71). The car is also compared to an "absurdly opulent," "wide lady squeezing down a narrow corridor" (65) or to "a big lady at a small ladies' party," gossiping in car language, "*Hslip Hslip Hsnooh-snah*" (113): a cartoon-like vision, of course, but also one which has a lot to say about social inequality, the conspicuous character of wealth and "bigness," or the imposed humility of "small things". Again the narrative voice appropriates the childish capacity for double, analogic vision, presenting the old disused Plymouth twenty-three years later, "like an angular, arthritic hen settling stiffly on her clutch of eggs," the signboard on its roof falling "like a collapsed crown" (295): the car is seen both in metaphoric terms (a comic image) and in symbolical terms, as the objective correlative of a scattered, decaying family that has lost its power. Sophie Mol, like the twins, immediately "sees" the "skyblue Plymouth" as a living sea creature "with tailfins" and a "chromebumpered sharksmile" (153), but Margaret, immune to such "vision", only worries about the image she will project, feeling "as though [she were] in an advertisement" (153).

The same could be said of the senses of smell and hearing. Sophie's first reaction to India is to learn, in the car, how to "recognize the first whiff of the approaching stench of unprocessed rubber and to clamp her nostrils shut" (154), whereas Estha is used to the stinging smell of "vinegar and asafoetida" of his grandmother's factory, and loves it (194). Rahel, angrily "squish[ing] and squash[ing]" "smelly ants" detachedly analyses the "faint crunchy sounds "they make as they die, "like an elf eating toast, or a crisp biscuit" (185). Ammu, "aged nine", watches her father shred her beloved gumboots, with scissors that "make snicking scissor-sounds", until he is "surrounded by a sea of twisting, rubber snakes" (181). This episode puts Ammu's brief life in perspective, showing us that if the Ayemenem house functions like a *gothic* house, where Ammu is "incoherent with rage and disbelief" at being "locked away like the family lunatic in a medieval household" (252), and where

Ammu must later lock herself *in*, inside her bedroom (225), her childhood was spent in another house of horrors in Delhi where she was often locked *out* by her perverse father, and therefore forced to endure “cold winter nights” “hiding in the mehndi hedge” (180-81). Ammu, we are told, is flogged by her father with an “*ivory*-handled riding crop” (181, my italics), a detail which might have been added to contribute to the Conradian intertext, but the description of the father “sitting in his mahogany rocking chair all along, rocking himself silently in the dark” evokes Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, while the scissors echo those with which Harper Lee’s Boo Radley stabs his tyrannical, perverse father, within the terrifying Radley House (Lee 11). Lee’s children often playact this gory scene: the narrator Scout is restricted to petty roles, playing “assorted ladies who entered the script<sup>5</sup>” (39), while Dill stars, making an accomplished “villain’s villain” “whose worst performance was Gothic” (39). This allows Lee to indulge in a comic self-reflexive caricature of her own work, and of the genre of the “Southern Gothic,” which she “caught” from William Faulkner, and which she obviously “passed on” to Arundhati Roy, as the latter testifies:

Actually, it's not just Rushdie I'm compared to. There's García-Márquez, Joyce ... and Faulkner, always Faulkner. [...]. But I've never read Faulkner before! [...]. I have, however, read some other writers from the American South – Mark Twain, Harper Lee – and I think that perhaps there's an infusion or intrusion of landscape in their literature that might be similar to mine. (Roy, interviewed by Jeena)

### **The ambivalence of repetition**

When Sophie Mol first appears she is marching like a soldier and endlessly repeating the same song (141): children delight in incantation, repetition, using language just for the music of its sonorities, and the repetitions, litanies, lists and anaphoras in Roy’s text deliberately mirror this propensity, but they can also be used to express obliquely the obsessions born of insecurity and trauma.

Over a hundred pages (and only twenty-four hours in the plot) separate the narration of the practical plans made for the trip back from

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<sup>5</sup> Just as Rahel is only allowed a small part in the “Play” welcoming Sophie home; she can only be “A flower perhaps. Or a tree. [...]. A Townspeople (Roy 172-73).



Cochin airport, when Rahel meditates on the words *boot* and *sturdy* (46) from the second occurrence of the same opposition, during the actual trip back: “*Boot* was a lovely word. *Sturdy* was a terrible word.” (153). There is no comment whatsoever on the part of the narrator to underline this echo, in fact readers are encouraged to receive this occurrence as Rahel’s bitter, laconic way of discovering that *boot* might not be such a “lovely” word after all: the thought had occurred to her the day before, in a carefree moment when she could still feel secure and enjoy language, as opposed to a present in which the space occupied by the twins in the back of the car (between Sophie in front and “the luggage [...] in the boot” (153) exactly reflects their inferior position within the family and in Chacko’s affections.

However Roy does not only use repetitions as a mimetic device to evoke carefree or care-laden childhood; in fact they almost always create meaning within the plot, providing effects of parallelism, contrast and echo, although this is not acknowledged by all critics, some of whom have been irked by Roy’s repetitive devices.<sup>6</sup> In fact in chapter 10 the first anaphora (in appearance a realistic description of the contents of the factory) ends with a mention of elements united by rhyme or par rhyme, like “glue-brush”, “grape-crush”, “lemon squash” (194), which create a transition towards Estha’s inner turmoil, also expressed in “list” form. Estha resents his mother’s incapacity to see through the pretence of the “Lemondrink fellow,” whom she deems a “sweet chap” (111), and to whom (Estha believes) she would offer “pineapple squash” “With ice. Yellow in a glass.” (194) if he came to Kottayam. This detail echoes the twins’ concern that they will be loved less, because the reader knows that their grandmother favours Sophie: “Mammachi wondered [...] whether Sophie Mol would like some iced grape crush. Some cold purple juice in a glass.” (167). But more importantly the real meaning of the dead

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<sup>6</sup> Marta Dvořák is especially hostile towards Roy’s novel, perceiving repetitions as “battology” (Dvořák 58) and “saturation” (60). She quotes as an example the beginning of Roy’s chapter 10 (describing Estha looking for a refuge with an anaphoric repetition of the preposition “past”), concluding that “the aesthetic purpose of Roy’s dynamics of saturation remains unclear” (61), but suggesting that Roy is pandering to the “Western readership” (61) for commercial reasons. Particularly problematic in a post-colonial context is Dvořák’s use of the singular in phrases like “Western readership” (as if readers in “the West” constituted a monolithic, unanimous block) or “[Roy] outraged her own community” (61): which “community” would that be? Whose “authorized” voice was it that expressed this “community’s” sense of “outrage”?

metaphors “crush” and “squash” is reactivated in the second anaphora, depicting the morbid images of violence and agony that Estha sees within the “sickly jam”: the “dying *frothly* shapes,” “A crow with a *crushed* wing,” “A clenched chicken’s claw,” “A sadly swirl.” The fate of those trapped and “mired” creatures functions as an objective correlative of Estha’s fear of his tormentor (with the Lemondrink man, Estha has encountered sexual abuse).

Ironically, the narrative voice uses the same typographical and anaphoric devices to deploy and unite different strategies: a prosaic and realistic intention (the pickling factory is described), the oblique, economic rendering of nightmarish childish fears, and aesthetically pleasing creation of echoes and cross references: both the neutral, realistic “empty bottles floating in soapbubbled water” and the pathetic, affect-laden “banana bubbles drowning deep in jam” belong to the same tragic motif of drowning that runs through the novel, from Sophie’s death to the “people trapped in the glass paperweight” on the desk of Inspector T. Mathew (317), whom Estha imagines dancing to “paperweight waltz music”, and who seem to be “waltzing underwater<sup>7</sup>” because of the “bubbles inside the paperweight.” The same motif informs the words chosen to represent the moment when Velutha, feeling the Terror “happening,” walks into the “dense” and “glutinous” darkness: “Pushing through it became an effort. Like swimming underwater” (285). Estha’s death-in-life, his denial, allow him to survive as “a quiet bubble floating on a sea of noise” (11) before his reunion with Rahel causes the world, “locked out for years” to “flood in”: “savage waters swept everything up [...] in a scrambled swirling” (15).

### **Orality, literacy, and bilingualism**

The seven-year old twins are precocious readers, who can read backwards as well as forwards, although reading backwards is an unauthorised, censored activity, deemed “satanic” by Miss Mitten (60). Roy likes playing with the fact that oral language subverts the boundaries between words, either because of its liaisons or because of an idiosyncratic way of speaking. When Sophie Mol says “Hello, all,” the jealous Rahel silently mocks her, deliberately hearing “*Hello wall*” (143). Ousa is an owl, a barn owl, but for the children he has remained the

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<sup>7</sup> The paperweight couple, “trapped” but “happy” “looking deep into each other’s eyes” (318) form an incongruous, ironic Western double of the doomed couple formed by Ammu and Velutha.

“Nowl” they used to think him, and now that they can read and know better, he has become a source of puns, as in “Ousa the Bar Nowl” (193). The discrepancy between spelling and saying is foregrounded when Baby Kochamma insists on their correct pronunciation of the “car-song”: the twins’ secret, rebellious response is to pun, in phonetic spelling, on the word *Prer NUN sea ayshun* (36).

The text bears traces of the evolution of the twins’ literacy: thus the banana jam recipe has been copied by Estha, partly “in his *old* best writing” (195), partly in his “new best handwriting” (196), complete with spelling mistakes. Chapter seven poignantly juxtaposes Rahel’s discovery of their old exercise notebooks, which their mother had hidden away, and the narration of Ammu’s death and funeral. The reader is given to see Estha’s compositions, and even if she can only imagine “the laboured form of each letter,” and “the struggle for control over the errant, self-willed pencil” (156), those short paragraphs bring home, much better than the children’s precocious *oral* language, how *small*, how young the twins were when they were confronted to tragedy and asked to choose between Velutha and their mother, between saving Ammu or sending her to jail (318).

The first story is apparently that of “Ulyesses”, but Estha’s misspelling highlights the fact that he identifies more with “the son” who is so relieved to welcome Ulysses back: “father I thought you would not come back” (157). This identification clearly betrays Estha’s longing for a father figure and his wishful thinking. The second story focuses on the dangers of traffic accidents, creating an ironical echo of Ammu’s fears about the vulnerability of her children, whom she pictures as “bewildered frogs” “lolloping arm in am down a highway full of hurtling traffic” (43). Those fears are echoed when the twins venture on the river in full spate and find themselves “in the wrong lane on a silent highway full of muffled traffic” (292). The more personal third story (158), which concentrates on the loving relationship between mother and twins, constitutes an elegiac trace of a paradise lost.

The twins also study Malayalam at home (54), not because, as Baneth-Nouailhetas (28) suggests, “in fact Malayalam is the twins’ second tongue, for which they need private lessons” but because they need to learn the *written* form of their mother-tongue. Many post-colonial children speak one or several native languages but have to read and write in a colonial language, therefore have to learn to read a language that they hardly know, like the children in a francophone country learning to read in French, but whereas in Africa many native languages are part of

an oral tradition and have no written form, in a country like India where writing is a very ancient practice, children have to learn a different alphabet with each new language. Malayalam, like many other Indic scripts, is an *abugida*, or a writing system that is partially “alphabetic” and partially syllable-based, but it is clear in the novel that Malayalam is the children’s first language.

When Miss Mitten, who is “a Little Disappointed in them” (59) questions the very existence of the word Malayalam, because she is “under the impression” that the language of Kerala is called “Keralese,” Estha imitates her peremptory, affected, arrogant idiom, turning it against her: “as far as he was concerned it was a Highly Stupid Impression” (60). Malayalam is the language that the twins use with Velutha, who uses their bilingualism to tease Rahel (177-178); and it also colours their apprehension of English words: if Rahel dislikes the word *sturdy*, which is “like a dwarf’s name”, it is because it resembles the Malayali word “Koshy<sup>8</sup>” (46). Clearly, the sonorities and connexions in *both* languages combine to create new connotations and a new signified for one signifier.

Quite a few words or sentences of Malayalam are transliterated in the novel and some of them are translated or explained. This annoys some Western critics who, forgetting that it is also an elemental courtesy towards the numerous *Indian* readers of English who cannot speak, let alone read, Malayalam, declare that explanations are “inauthentic” concessions to Western ignorance. However, those words that are *not* translated create a kind of private joke in the English text, aimed at Malayalam speakers, as when Malayalam words designating specific family relationships are used (37), but non Malayalam speakers can understand the spirit if not the letter of the joke: the children are yearning for Chacko to let them call him father, but Chacko cruelly makes fun of this deep desire.

### **Parroting versus invention**

Childhood is not essentialised and certainly not idealised and Roy’s vision of childhood is never sentimental or syrupy. Indeed the narrator implicitly condemns the hypocritical sentimentality of the “Fond Smiles” of adults following “sweet cousins” (186). However, some children are ridiculed to make a point about how different children, and their relation to language, can be. Latha, Pillai’s niece, and her cousin, Pillai’s son

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<sup>8</sup> For Western readers, “Sturdy” also rhymes with “Grumpy” and “Dopey”, two of Walt Disney’s dwarves.

Lenin, are treated as grotesque figures of mimicry who mouth words they don't understand, instrumentalising language as a tool for upward mobility in the social jungle: they are "characteratures," to borrow Jem's malapropism (Lee 67). Latha is a bidimensional creature from a comic strip or a cartoon: "each of her tight shining plaits was looped over and tied with ribbons so that they hung down on either side of her face like the outlines of large, drooping ears that hadn't been coloured in yet" (Roy 271). Lenin stands "on one thin leg like a stork," "screech[ing] effortlessly" (270).

Rahel and Estha despise Lenin, whom for a long time they regard as "just another pleat in his mother's sari" (131), and they never simply parrot language; they savour and twist it, making English and Malayalam collide creatively. The twins' imagination, their appetite for language games and the weaving of imaginary tales allows the narrative voice to illustrate, rather than explain, how language can be used to transform one's own life into a story, which, in the case of Estha more particularly, is an attempt to deal with trauma. It also provides the narrator with an opportunity to weave the twins' linguistic games into the themes and imagery of the novel itself. Thus when Rahel, Ammu and Baby Kochamma are using the toilets in the Abhilash Talkies<sup>9</sup>, Rahel comments on how long it takes her aunt to urinate, by making up a little hybrid story out of two existing nursery thymes:

*Rubadub dub* (Rahel thought) /*Three women in a tub, / Tarry a while said Slow.* She thought of Slow being a person. Slow Kurien. Slow Kutty. Slow Mol. Slow Kochamma. *Slow Kutty. Fast Verghese. And Kuriakose. Three brothers with dandruff.*" (96, italics in the original)

Rahel is inventively fusing "Rub-a-dub-dub<sup>10</sup>" and "To bed! To bed!<sup>11</sup>" She has changed "three men" to "three women" to allow for her present situation; and she understands the second rhyme in the light of the Malayalam way of naming a person. Like many bilingual children, Rahel does not perceive the two languages she speaks as separate and

<sup>9</sup> For a commentary of this episode see also Lanone 138.

<sup>10</sup> Rub-a-dub-dub, / Three men in a tub, / And who do you think they be? / The butcher, the baker, / The candlestick-maker, / They all sailed out to sea, / 'Twas enough to make a man stare.

<sup>11</sup> "To bed! To bed!" Says Sleepy-head; 'Tarry awhile,' says Slow; 'Put on the pot,' Says Greedy-sot; 'We'll sup before we go.'

competing elements, but she delights in associating them and in creating newness from their fusion. From a structural point of view moreover, her image of three figures “all sail[ing] out to sea” in an inadequate boat foreshadows the drowning of Sophie Mol, and her evocation of “three brothers with dandruff” belongs to the pattern woven by the numerous references to bodily waste present in the novel, meant to ridicule “Touchable” insistence on the ritual hierarchy of purity and impurity, such as the “grey paste of sweat and dandruff lodged under [Chacko’s] fingernails” (278), or the insistence on Baby Kochamma’s stool in the police station toilet (319).

Rahel’s invention of “three brothers” also provides a good example of how the twins’ “single Siamese soul” (41) works, since Estha appropriates rhymes or stories in much the same way and creates his own vision of “three brothers with hammers, Pectin, Hectin, and Abednego,” “racing against time” to build an ark while “animals queued up in pairs”:

Girlboy  
Girlboy  
Girlboy  
Girlboy.  
Twins were not allowed. (195-196)

The passage is both comic and tragic, and alternates remarkably between Estha’s quoted inner monologue, expressed in a paratactic and verb-less “childish” idiom (194, 196) and the elaborate, literary sentences used by the omniscient narrator’s voice, as in “The sound of their hammering echoing dully under the brooding, storm-coming sky” (195).

Estha’s animal story comically fuses together a recipe for jam, and two biblical stories that of Noah’s ark (Genesis 7-9) and that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 1:7). It is part of his long meditation in the pickle factory, where he has taken refuge “to Think” (194) after the sexual aggression of the Lemondrink Man: from morbid images redolent of self pity, like that of the “little banana bubbles drowning deep in jam and nobody to help them” (194), “Estha Alone” builds up his defences, using the escapism of imagination and daydreaming (“the Witches of Macbeth”, the rhyming phrase “three brothers with hammers”), to find his way to a practical solution. Indeed, since “Twins are not allowed” among the “Girlboy” couples on Pectin’s ark (a detail which foreshadows the tragic motif of the twins’ exclusion and incest), Estha thinks up the subversive “Thought Number Three [rising] unbidden from his beige and

pointy shoes”: why not find his own boat, his own ark? This thought breaks his brooding silence, and his voice suddenly “fill[s] the factory” with a defiant scatological song that, like the above-mentioned dandruff, contributes to the blurring of the lines between pure and impure, touchable and untouchable (196-197).

In the earlier scene of sexual abuse, Estha had already resorted to inventing a variation on a famous rhyme in an attempt to cope with the shock. Forced to masturbate the drinks vendor, who spurs him on with his comments, “good,” “excellent” (104), before closing his “tight and sweaty” hand “tighter over Estha’s,” and “faster still” (104). This precise, unflinching description of abuse is followed by a little rhyme which is not attributed to anyone’s voice or thoughts but which cleverly expresses Estha’s sense of guilt and entrapment:

Fast faster fest  
 Never let it rest  
 Until the fast is faster  
 And the faster’s fest<sup>12</sup>. (104)

This, convincingly, sounds like nonsense born of panic, and yet it makes sense: the original edifying rhyme, meant to encourage children to be “good” and do their “best” can only be perceived as deeply reproachful by a child who feels polluted, hence unlovable (106). Just as Macbeth could not “pronounce ‘Amen’<sup>13</sup>”, Estha cannot utter “good” and “best”, the words “stick in his throat” and have to be replaced. Moreover, the fact of substituting the nonsensical word “fest” in lieu of “best” suggests that Estha’s attempt to divert his mind from what is being done to his body will be ineffectual: the traumatic day will *fester* inside him, making the “hoovering” of the octopus and the silencing necessary (32). In the same way the Orangedrink Man has permanently soiled the word “lucky” for Estha, as it always will remind him of the molesting and the threats (105, 150). Like Estha, Rahel knows that some things can be forgotten while others for ever “sit on dusty shelves like stuffed birds with baleful, sideways staring eyes” (129).

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<sup>12</sup> Apparently a meaningless variation on the following rhyme: “Good better best / Never let it rest, / Till your good is better / And your better is best.”

<sup>13</sup> *Macbeth*, II, 2, 31.

### **Conclusion**

Arundhati Roy's novel depicts childhood in a deeply convincing way, delicate, comical and moving, very literary in its insistence on the plasticity and creativity of language as apprehended by children. The specific structure of her novel makes this depiction of childhood all the more tragic as it is clear from the beginning that the "Small Price to Pay," as Baby Kochamma says, is in fact exorbitant: "Two lives. Two children's childhoods" (336) are sacrificed. But Roy's poetic text has succeeded in capturing the precious, volatile quality of those childhoods killed by adults who have lost a part of their humanity by forgetting their own childhood, like Comrade Pillai and Inspector Matthew,

both men whom childhood had abandoned without a trace. Men without curiosity. Without doubt. Both in their own way truly, terrifyingly adult. They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. (262).

Conversely, Velutha, whose "youngness" makes Ammu smile "as though he was her child" (336) is "a grown man" (190) who would never dream of spoiling the children's imaginative games: "[i]n instinctively colluding in the conspiracy of their fiction," he cannot "shatter a story" or "ruin a fragment of a dream" (190). The Ayemenem house is compared to "an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life" (165), but what Roy sees in childhood is not *transience*, but the salt of life.

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