East Is East and South Is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the Twain shall meet
—Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ballad of East and West' (1892)

I will begin with a symptomatic account of the remarkable critical reception of an Indian woman poet, Sarojini Naidu (1876–1949), called 'the little Indian princess', in London in the 1890s.[1] Born in Hyderabad into a prominent intellectual Bengali family (the Chattopadhyays), Sarojini Naidu as a girl showed an extraordinary precocity in writing poetry, mainly in imitation of British Romantic writers: her ambition was to be 'a Keats for India'.[2] At fifteen she was sent to England, to King's College, London, and then Girton in Cambridge, both to continue her education, and—her parents' explicit desire—to separate her from the man who was anyway to be her future husband: as a non-Brahmin he was deemed unsuitable as a marriage partner. In 1892, the same year that Kipling was writing 'The Ballad of East and West' from which my epigraph is taken, the remarkable facility and seemingly effortless mimicry of Naidu's poetry, collected in *Songs* (1895), her first book of poems, came to the attention of some of the foremost English critics of the day, including Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons. Edmund Gosse was later to give an account of his encounter with this 'most brilliant', 'most original' work and of its outcome, an equally remarkable mimicry in reverse, which he would encourage:

1 Naidu's poetry appeared in four collections published between 1895 and 1917: *Songs*, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing*. The 'little Indian princess' is Yeats's term, according to Maud Gonne, *A Servant of the Queen*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1938, p. 331.

2 Edmund Gosse, Introduction, in Sarojini Naidu, *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring*, London: William Heinemann, 1912, p. 7.

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> By some accident . . . Sarojini was introduced to our house at an early date after her arrival in London, and she soon became one of the most welcome and intimate of our guests. It was natural that one so impetuous and so sympathetic should not long conceal from her hosts the fact that she was writing copiously in verse—in English verse. I entreated to be allowed to see what she had composed, and a bundle of MSS. was slipped into my hand. I hastened to examine it as soon as I was alone, but now there followed a disappointment, and with it an embarrassment. . . . The verses which Sarojini had entrusted to me were skilful in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment, but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality. They were Western in feeling and in imagery; they were founded on reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley; I am not sure that they did not even breathe an atmosphere of Christian resignation. . . . this was the note of the mockingbird with a vengeance.[3]

Disappointed, Gosse then took it upon himself, as he goes on to recount, to give Sarojini some fatherly advice: she should make herself over again, reconstitute herself as 'a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan', not 'a clever machine-made imitator of the English classics':

> I ventured to speak to her sincerely. I advised the consignment of all that she had written, in the falsely English vein, to the waste-paper basket. I implored her to consider that from a young Indian of extreme sensibility, who had mastered not merely the language but the prosody of the West, what we wished to receive was . . . some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul.[4]

Confronted with this 'sincere' request—in effect a demand from the authoritative 'we' of western literary opinion, sanctioned by the promise of its still qualified praise—Sarojini did indeed 'docilely', in Gosse's words, work to shed the trappings of her Romantic masquerade: 'to write no more about robins and skylarks, in a landscape of our Midland counties, with the village bells somewhere in the distance'. She instead began to produce, no doubt to a great extent without cynicism, a very different type of pastiche, yet one which was ironically, and again symptomatically, another imitation of a western invention. In effect she was to recreate once more the 'tone of the mockingbird with a vengeance', though one reverberating from a different vantage point: not the West as the East due to its colonial education believed it was to be seen, but the East as seen by the West, represented by an eastern woman writing from the perspective of the West. In her second and third

3 Ibid., pp. 4–5.

4 Ibid., p. 5.

collections, *The Golden Threshold* (1905) and *The Bird of Time* (1912),[5] as Gosse goes on to write, Naidu no longer concealed 'the exclusively Indian source of her inspiration'. Addressing herself to 'emotions which are tropical and primitive', she now became, through her western make-over, 'fully' native: 'she springs from the very soil of India'. Combining technical skill learned outside 'the magic circle' of the Orient, with inside knowledge, her poems, as Gosse says, will be found 'as luminous in lighting up the dark places of the East as any contribution of savant or historian'.[6]

The bizarre and disturbing force of Naidu's ventriloquism is a fascinating instance of the double-voiced and indeed doubled colonial mimicry of a European aesthetic: it is amply demonstrated, for example, in the decorative and fatalistic effects threaded through the *The Bird of Time* collection. This complicated mimicry is worth an extended study in itself, and is probably only fully heard when we read her poetry side-by-side with an awareness of her career as a nationalist activist, her involvement in Gandhi's passive resistance campaigns, and her rhetoric urging a 'battle' for India.[7] What I am immediately interested in here however is not so much Naidu's response as such, as the orientalizing and implicitly coercive terms of Gosse's critical appreciation. These were terms that were echoed in the praise she also received from the symbolist Arthur Symons, who appreciated in particular the sinuous sensualisms not only of her work, but of her physical presence, clad in 'clinging dresses of Eastern silk': 'Through that soul I seemed to touch and take hold upon the East.'[8] For Symons, Naidu's prose as well as poetry appeared as sensation embodied, vehemently sincere, 'un-English, Oriental' in feeling even though English in structure.

Symons's vocabulary of appreciation is evidently overheated and to our ears perhaps excessive, but not, read alongside Gosse, untypical. Moreover theirs are terms, I want to suggest, which have repeated themselves across the century, indeed up to the present time, in western readings of foreign, especially perhaps Indian, writing. It is possible to find in recent criticism of postcolonial work a configuration of cultural differences between West and East, or North and South—between 'village bells' and bazaar cries—that remains not entirely dissimilar from that within which Gosse and Symons were working.[9] In sometimes imperceptible ways, the past of colonial discourse seems in certain instances to be repeating itself upon the present that is postcolonial criticism.[10] Despite postcolonialism's anti-colonial agenda, and its intersection with other liberatory theories such as feminism and minority discourses, forms of the criticism, as I will demonstrate, appear to have inherited still unexamined categories of the past, and to be reiterating, certainly in their journalistic manifestations, its objectifications of otherness.

At this point I want to engage in an exercise of juxtaposition: to keep the phrases and images used in the appreciation of Naidu's work in mind, and

5 Sarojini Naidu, *The Golden Threshold*, intro. Arthur Symons, London: William Heinemann, 1905, was dedicated to Gosse and brought together the poems written after his intervention.

6 Gosse, p. 6.

7 See, for example, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (eds), *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, vol. 1, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 329–40.

8 Arthur Symons, Introduction, in Naidu, *Golden Threshold*, pp. 9–10, 18.

9 I am here following Arif Dirlik's definition: 'North connotes the pathways of transnational capitalism, and South, the marginalized populations of the world, regardless of their location'; Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', in Padmini Mongia (ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, London: Arnold, 1996, p. 311. 'South' can also be read less metaphorically in so far as the rich countries of the world tend to be concentrated in the northern hemisphere.

10 See Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 27–8.

turn to look at the critical reception of an Indian woman writer in the 1990s, one hundred years on from the time of Gosse's ardent appreciation of Naidu, this 'English' but 'un-English Oriental'. The writer is Arundhati Roy, much-hyped and hailed as the long-awaited female Rushdie even before winning the 1997 Booker Prize for her bestselling first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997).[11]

In the paragraphs that follow, I should immediately say, I want to set to one side the criticism of Roy's writing as lushly overwritten, overwhelmed by its poetic effects, though it is important to signal that such criticism certainly does exist.[12] Instead I want to focus on the elements that were repeatedly accentuated in the critical promotion of Roy in the West. First, most prominently, there was her being female in a group of predominantly male younger Indian novelists (Vikram Chandra, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, all of whom are usually seen as standing in some sort of relationship to Salman Rushdie), and, related to this, her intensely feminine elfin beauty.[13] Another marked-out feature of her experience was her own cross-caste, hybrid background (which is to an extent reflected in the central drama of the novel, the love affair between Ammu, the single mother of twins, and the 'Untouchable' Velutha). Added to this complex of promotional features, was the 'overwhelmed' response to the novel of some of its first British readers, especially that of David Godwin her agent.[14] Avoiding any significant mention of the novel's appeal to certain western cultural forms, such as the worldwide 1960s popularity of Elvis Presley, this powerful effect was critically accounted for by reference to the novel's 'original' use of English, its remarkable 'linguistic inventiveness' and its 'exuberant', 'shape-shifting narrative'.[15] The verbal intricacy and play were then seen as strikingly contrasted with the disturbing subject matter, the 'intimate and revealing portrait of the caste-system', in particular the focus on the 'forbidden' sexual touch of the Untouchable, and on the horrific punishment which follows (as well as the representation of child molestation and incest between twins).[16] In some reviews, the layerings and interconnections of contrasting experience, of national turmoil and personal suffering, of physical wounding and linguistic artistry, of pain accented by play, and play hollowing out pain, were considered as being further elaborated in the cultural and political layerings of the narrative: the minglings of Hindu ritual, especially Kathikali dance, Marxist activism and Christian proselytizing that characterized social life in Kerala in and around 1969.

What one cannot help noticing as emerging out of the above juxtaposition of the 1890s and 1990s moments of reception of these two Indian writers is how certain critical elements have resonated down the century, from the time of the critical acclaim for Naidu. These features are concentrated in particular in the conflation of biography, body and writing

11 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, London: Flamingo 1997. Page references will be included in the text. Before 18 October 1997, the novel was already reputed to have sold 500,000 copies in eighteen languages.

12 See Shirley Crew, 'The House in Kerala', *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 May 1997, p. 23; Alex Clark, 'Fatal Distractions', *Guardian*, 19 June 1997; Michael Gorra, 'Living in the Aftermath', *London Review of Books*, 19 June 1997, pp. 22–3; Stephen Moss, 'A Contest Won in a Vacuum', *Guardian*, 15 October 1997.

13 See, for example, 'Interview', *Vrij Nederland*, 18 October 1997, pp. 18–19. Latterly, across 1998 and 1999, no doubt in part on the back of Roy's success, a number of Indian women first novelists have sprung into prominence: Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur, Ameena Meer, Shauna Singh Baldwin.

14 See 'CV: David Godwin', *Independent*, 20 October 1997.

15 Gillian Beer, quoted in *Guardian*, 15 October 1997; and Alice Truax's review in *New York Times Book Review*, 25 May 1997, p. 5. See also Floris van Straaten, 'Wreedheid als sleutel tot de liefde', *NRC Handelsblad* (Amsterdam), 17 October 1997, p. 10.

which characterizes the terms through which the works of both Naidu and Roy are perceived. Noteworthy, though not always typical, is the singling out of a slight body shape as somehow corresponding to stylistic whimsicality, or specifically, Indian stylistic whimsicality, or as worth mentioning in relation to it. More pervasive is the way in which the decorated writings of both poet and novelist are regarded as being both appropriate to their eastern subject matter, including caste restrictions, and also as interacting evocatively with the distress that is described: her 'lyric energy', Gosse writes of Naidu, has an intensity imparted by the sorrow implicit in her subject matter, and present in her life—the words could be a paraphrase of comments made about Roy.[17]

The first thing to remark about these to me intriguing parallels is that there is of course very little that is new about a woman writer being either censured or praised, and, either way, objectified, on the basis primarily of her gender (reinforced by race or ethnic) identity. What is especially striking in these parallel instances however is how the several interconnections converge in the notions, on the one hand, of lyric complexity and emotional intensity, and, on the other, of singular femaleness. In the case of Naidu, this convergence is explicitly also tied in with her being oriental, and her explicitly orientalized poetry. For Gosse she is the foremost Indian poet in English because her 'technical skill' illuminates her authentically 'tropical and primitive' emotion, that 'magic circle' of India present in her verse. To this sultry, delicate magic her femaleness is then also particularly appropriate. The Orient with its perfumes and ardent sensations is for Gosse and Symons classically conceptualized as feminine. But Naidu's femininity also marks her out as a creature apart. As a woman poet of the Deccan she stands out as almost entirely unique. In her imitativeness, she is, in some sense, safely inimitable: there will be few more like her to intervene in western aesthetic perceptions of the East.

In Roy's case, the western projection of an eastern identity on to an Indian writer appears to be less in evidence. Yet arguably, both in the attention paid to her ornate linguistic effects and in the acceptance of its excesses (which is what is to an extent involved in the book's popularity and success), there is a tacit understanding that this style in some way suits, while also contrasting productively and provocatively with, the Indian subject matter of the novel. The deft verbal play is set against the brutal ravages of caste prejudice, seen by Westerners since at least the 1700s as an essentially oriental problem. Involved with this acceptance is also that excitement over Roy's unique position as the first girl among the 'new boys'. In Roy's situation as in Naidu's, therefore, the critical interest in verbal effects, and the general responsiveness to their emotional, indeed 'tropical', intensity, is significantly inflected and perhaps also intensified by their being women writers, which is related to their writing as women, from women's,

16 See both Moss and Truax.

17 Gosse, pp. 7–8.

particularly domestic, perspectives. (Here we might think, for example, of Naidu's concern with purdah and child marriage, and Roy's with female frustrations in the domestic context, and with the status of the single mother in southern Indian society.)

Bearing in mind how Naidu's poetry was seen to require a more oriental slant, and how the Orient of her verse was conceived of in feminine terms, I now want to ask whether, in the postcolonial reception and perception of Roy, we cannot see a similar conflation taking place? It is a conflation which, I would suggest, might most succinctly, if in general terms, be described as new or neo-orientalist.[18] Even as she herself emphasizes that the India she writes about is not extraordinary but ordinary, could the critical perception of Roy in western critical circles not be said to intersect her harrowing themes and verbal extravagance with her Indian and feminine identity (with comparatively little regard for the regional complexities of 1969 Kerala with which the novel is so intensely concerned)?

To this a response might be that an appreciation of Roy or of other Indian writers which lays a positive accent on the feminine qualities of the writing could justly be viewed as an inversion of conventional gendered values. In my view, however, any such inversion by a postcolonial text must be considered in the particular cultural and political context of its production and reception. What does this construction of a contemporary Indian literary femininity tell us about how the West continues to read the East, setting it up as a lasting prototype for its fascination with difference? This then leads to further questions. Does the implicit characterization of an oriental feminine in some postcolonial critiques (of which I am taking the critical reception of Roy as symptomatic) not leave embedded entrenched differences between an exotic and impassioned East and a consuming West, interested in yet distancing itself from the East's enticements and intensities? And does this characterization not then reinforce ways in which the West has always scrutinized and objectified the Other, whether the East in the case of India, or the South more generally? Aren't there elements of this criticism that create a profound sense of *déja vu*? Indian writers have been fêted and exceptionalized in this way before, at the height of Empire, and fêted in very similar terms.

Following on from this, the tendency I want to underline is a critical inclination to regard as more culturally alive, interestingly authentic and intensively postcolonial than other kinds of international writing the extravagant realism and exuberant word-play associated with certain Indian writers, including Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy.[19] What we seem to be up against in this criticism is a replication of inherited categories of colonial difference—in particular the objectification of otherness memorably described by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978)—of perceptions of India as multiple, extreme, scented, sensual, transgressive (yet in some sense

18 Gayatri Spivak, in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 277, and 'Neocolonialism and the Secret Agent of Knowledge', interview with Robert Young, *Oxford Literary Review: Neocolonialism* 13, 1991, 226–7, has used the term 'new orientalism' to describe the homogenizing, decontextualizing effects of late twentieth-century multiculturalism. I prefer 'neo-orientalism', because of its analogy with neo-colonialism.

19 The intensity accentuated of course by the famously erratic capitalization of *The God of Small Things*.

obligingly compliant with western conceptions of itself). This is an objectification that perhaps becomes particularly noticeable, and worth questioning, when a woman writer is involved. In the criticism we see locked together traditional characterizations of the eternal feminine and the eternal oriental—an equally traditional interconnection which produces a gendered notion of orientalist typicality that has shifted, as it were, from racial character to text. To overstate the matter in order to make my point: the writing that is deemed most interesting and typical seems to be a writing that is perfumed, decorated, sinuous, sensuous, plural, unruly—most intensely and appropriately so when produced by a woman. Overdetermined in all its strangeness, abstracted from its local context, stereotyped and restereotyped, the exotic attraction of the once-colonized appears therefore to have been imported into postcolonial criticism, and, in the process, to have been commodified and made safe for a western readership.

This critical interest in a still feminized Orient lays bare what I want to explore in the last portion of this paper: the neo-orientalist underpinnings of postcolonial literary criticism from the West, based in part on its location in the neo-imperialist centre. Colonial modes of seeing and knowing were notoriously articulated through gendered metaphors of penetration and so on. It is therefore important for us to ask whether the privileging of postcolonial women writers, as more fully, authentically or differently representing their alterity than others, can be taken as we would want to take it—as a justified privileging? Or do western critics in the process risk deploying native women, as before, to signify that which is most exotic, intriguing and strange about once-colonized cultures? Does the gendered primitive remain, though in a magic realist or postmodernized guise, the bearer of the West's exotic interests and subversive desires? In this regard it is worth reminding ourselves that *The God of Small Things* tells a heated tale of multiply forbidden desire, a tale which, exquisitely narrated from a feminine point of view, takes place against the luxuriant tropical backcloth of South India, a relocated, velvety black and only semi-ironic 'heart of darkness' (1, 52, 125, 204, 267).

In attempting to foreground the neo-colonial and gender biases of the criticism, I am, I should perhaps belatedly stress, having to bracket the complicities and nuances of tone through which Roy's prose, as well as Naidu's writing, may subversively confuse and throw sand in western eyes. In paragraph after paragraph of Roy's dense experimental writing, we see the English language—the language bequeathed by the British colonizer, as she has recognized—expanded, distorted, excavated, disconcerted. There is to my mind no question about the energy and oppositionality of this writing. But what *is* up for scrutiny are the evaluative vocabularies and critical techniques which, in the academy, and in the critical columns often supplied from the academy, are used to represent, for instance, Roy's work. Can these

become correspondingly oppositional and sensitive to creative ambivalence, without falling into the trap of objectifying difference?

In exploring the theoretical and institutional determinants of this situation a little further, we have to recognize how the mostly very enabling currency of Homi Bhabha's theories of the hybrid, as well as of Bakhtin's ideas about polyphony, have perhaps caused postcolonial literary subversions and multiplicity to become not only too expected as being always already there, but also in consequence to be seen as self-sufficient in their displacement from, and confounding of, a Eurocentric history. In a postmodern context of shattered temporalities and rejected essences, it has now become almost customary to view migrant or Third World texts as having the potential to undercut or reverse the West's foundational concepts, primarily on the basis of the writer's syncretic or migrant vantage point. This trend is exacerbated by the redemptive story of progress which postcolonial criticism in the western liberal academy and in publishing circles tells itself: its self-representation as advanced, advancing and democratizing because voices from the margins are being given a hearing. So a female Indian writer wins the prestigious prize which Rushdie first claimed for India not so long ago, establishing if there were any remaining doubts about the matter, the cultural striking back of the once-peripheral.[20]

To generalize therefore: where postcolonial critical attention touches down, in East or South, there is a tendency for mixing and multivocality, a feminine polymorphousness, to reproduce itself whatever the historical or cultural location. And the impression which results is of an energetic if bewildering babble of novelistic voices which can be best organized, it seems, simply by placing it under the title 'postcolonialism' like sweepings under the carpet: India in effect remains the teeming spectacle of the Grand Trunk Road in *Kim* (1901), viewed god-like from on high. As Aijaz Ahmad puts it in a typically strenuous essay, 'the whole of the "Third World", . . . singularized into an oppositionality, [is] idealized as the site, simultaneously, of alterity and authenticity'.[21] With this scenario in mind, it is significant, as Arif Dirlik has also pointed out, that postcolonial literary studies have emerged at a time when global capitalism continues to generate stark economic and power imbalances between different parts of the world, in other words, to produce a neo-colonial marginalization and dependency.[22] I do not want to go as far as Dirlik in suggesting a *knowing* complicity between postcolonial studies and global neo-colonialism; I do not wish to argue that postcolonialism in some sense consciously does the ideological work of a global free market, where cultural diversity is restlessly decontextualized and commodified.[23] Yet it does seem to me that postcolonial criticism *is* related to, and representative of, the continuing dominance of the formerly imperial metropolis. The dominance is indicated not only by the persistence of a (neo-)orientalist rhetoric, but also by such

20 The very phrases used to articulate this advance are often expressive of western Christian humanist values. In this sense we might want to apply Terry Eagleton's line describing the persistence of total systems in a postmodern world to postcolonialism: 'The term "post", if it has any meaning at all, means business as usual, only *more so*' (Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, London: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 380–1).

21 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, New York and London: Verso, 1992, p. 33.

22 Dirlik, pp. 294–320.

23 See Jon Mee's speculations on the ideological work done within India by the Indian novel in English, 'After Midnight: the Indian Novel in English of the 80s and 90s', *Postcolonial Studies* 1/1, April 1998, 127–41, esp. 132, 134.

factors as the location of critics, the subsequent direction of the postcolonial gaze at already 'othered' cultures and the relative neglect of transnational capitalism as a subject for discussion and critique. It is precisely because of this emphasis on the textual over the contextual that postcolonial studies can in certain respects come to resemble both a camouflage for a still-powerful centre, and a subterfuge: an 'opportunistic [adjustment] by the centre of power to accommodate changes of power without loss of authority'.[24]

To say it another way, postcolonial criticism has landed in terrain which under another aspect it knows all too well. Here is the familiar city, the appropriative metropolis; over there, beyond the city walls, are jungles, dangerous rivers, elephants and other exotic phenomena, the Other against which the imperial city defines itself, and which it tirelessly monitors and seeks to control in order to maintain its ascendancy. The difference now is that certain individuals and texts from out there, promoted perhaps by their class positions or other elitist structures, have been admitted to the city the better to ensure the efficiency of its monitoring.

The question must then be: are there ways of cutting through this neo-orientalist bind in order to give the very real vitality of postcolonial literatures their due regard? It is evidently true that no cultural or academic interest in reversed values or subversive texts will of itself reverse hierarchies in the world, especially where these postcolonial interests themselves work within hierarchies which still exclude East and South. Yet a criticism that remains continually vigilant about what I have called the neo-orientalist aspects of its own interpretative terms, and of its neo-colonial context, will go some distance towards at least confronting if not challenging those hierarchies. In order to effect this vigilance it may be necessary to set up contextualizing temporalities, or local, 'small' histories, in short, background stories, which would reveal, for example, the many social, political and linguistic determinants which have shaped, and continue to shape, what we now call postcolonial hybridity: Roy's extravagant play with English does not simply float free of her time. But alongside this, and at least as important, postcolonial readings also demand a sensitivity to agency, including women's agency, and an effort to relate interpretative practices to cultural knowledge. What, for instance, is the relationship of *The God of Small Things* to a vernacular tradition of Kathikali with its open-ended structures of narration? On related lines, Gayatri Spivak has usefully warned that any postcolonial reading must be approached as a continuously self-critical, contextualizing and intensively 'inter-literary' rather than a conventionally 'comparative' exercise.[25]

To circle round to where I began, it is essential to remember that resistances do of course emerge in texts, as they do in contexts: the point is to keep both in play.[26] Through a restless layering and contortion of accepted meanings, postcolonial fictions, plays and poems, whether in

24 Paul Hamilton, *Historicism*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 178, 149–50. For their comments on postcolonialism's neo-colonial complicities, see also Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 245–58, and Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, New York and London: Verso, 1997, pp. 3–4, 17–21.

25 Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 277.

26 For a useful overview of the different axes inscribed or ascribed by postcolonial criticism, see Stephen Slemon, 'The Scramble for Post-Colonialism', in Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (eds), *De-Scribing Empire*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 15–32.

English or in other languages, continually chafe at western self-reference and convention. Emerging from beyond established cultural borderlines, such texts assert an irreconcilability or recalcitrance, an 'enunciatory disorder', as Homi Bhabha puts it: a strangeness which antagonistically and creatively interrupts western forms of understanding.[27] It is not enough therefore simply to cover and coat such resistance with the now over-familiar and unexamined, though still relatively safe, term 'hybridity'.

The mention of disorder and creative interruption finally returns me to what I mentioned earlier with regard to the wayward intricacies of Roy's writing, which I then had to bracket: the 'ambiguous unclassifiable consistency' of her writing, to adapt a quotation from the text itself (30). The poems and the poetic exercises in prose of Naidu and Roy respectively, their stilted and skittish burlesques, and the evasive or over-stylized arabesqueries of their language, demonstrate a subtle subversion that at once co-operates with and exceeds the definitions criticism imposes. There is something chillingly composed in a poem of Naidu's like the two-part 'Songs of My City' from *The Bird of Time* (1912), in which different voices obediently perform a pastiche of a many-textured spice-rich India which, in each one of the paired poems, comes to rest on images of silence and confinement, or death.[28]

Differently though connectedly, Roy's writing persistently works at unsettling and undoing the English language. Strange attractions are created between words through rhyming and alliterative patterns. Grief-stricken, the mother Ammu's eyes are 'a redly dead', a 'deadly red' (31). Having reached the age at which her mother died, Rahel too is at 'a viable, die-able age' (3, with many repetitions). Most predominantly, the childish play on language of the seven-year-old twins at the centre of the story shockingly literalizes conventional actions and sayings, including phrases from Kipling ('we be of one blood, thou and I'), exposing hidden cruelties. At the film of *The Sound of Music*, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man 'moved Esta's hand up and down [his penis]. First slowly. Then fastly' (103). Ammu, forced to leave Ayemenem after the discovery of her love affair, has to 'pack her bags and leave. Because she had no Locusts Stand I' (159). As the narrative voice remarks: 'Only the Small Things were said. The Big Things lurked unsaid inside' (173). Throughout, the novel insists on this co-existence and sometimes forgotten interaction of great and little 'gods', of small and large forces, *grand* and *petit* narratives, if you like. In a country such as the one Rahel comes from, 'various kinds of despair competed for primacy'. Personal despair is caught up in and only seemingly dwarfed by 'the public turmoil of a nation': 'That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded deification. Then Small God (cosy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity' (19).

27 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 126–7.

28 Sarojini Naidu, 'Songs of My City', in E. Boehmer (ed.), *Empire Writing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 314–15.