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Love Laws: Trauma and Transgression in Morrison and Roy

Toni Morrison's *Love* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* both use achronological and polyphonic prose to demonstrate the damaging effects of abusive power dynamics on the vulnerable psyches of children. These dynamics include socioeconomic inequality, infrastructural corruption, and pedophilia. The novels explicate overlapping themes that were central to the lives of people of color struggling for social mobility between the 1960s and the late twentieth century. They illustrate the decay of formerly paradisiacal places due to white tourism, and the division that threatened to undermine progressive movements such as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the Marxist movement in India. Meanwhile, the most vulnerable members of each society – children of color – grew up neglected and abused. The adults in these children's lives, from mentally ill mothers to sexual predators, become complicit in their trauma by failing to protect them from greater systemic issues. As a result, their children's psyches become fossilized in a posttraumatic fugue, a microcosm of their societies' inability to heal from their crimes against humanity.

Due to global postcolonialism, people of color in both novels' settings were vying for room in their nations' burgeoning middle classes. Rahel and Estha's family belongs to the Touchable caste and a small local population of Keralan Christians in Ayemenem, India. Their socioeconomic status hinges on their grandfather's career as an imperial entomologist and their grandmother's success as a pickling factory owner. However, their occupations are undermined

by racism and sexism when Pappachi's discovery is patented under a white man's name and Mammachi's factory is leased to her sole male heir, who drives its finances into the ground by attempting to accommodate both his Marxist beliefs and his capitalist career. The family is also divided over the employment of a talented and beloved Untouchable neighbor who becomes crucial to the novel's development. Just as the factory crumbles due to the irreconcilability of its foundation and execution, Cosey's hotel, located in Silk, Florida, is described as a "fairy tale" that became "dependent for its life on the people it once excluded" (Morrison 42). Cosey himself is the epitome of the early incongruity of the Black middle class in the United States, reflecting that "he was uncomfortable being jovial with middle-aged white men" but that "the well-to-do black men also made him feel out of place" (111). Published eight years apart, from 1997 to 2005, *The God of Small Things* and *Love* are retrospective resumes of the complex social justice movements competing for dominance in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Typical of the authors' postmodern imagination, the form of both novels is as fluid and fragmented as the memories it attempts to mimic. Literary critic and professor Hope Jennings wrote of Roy's characters, "They are incapable of making sense of their history yet are compelled to... lay claim in whatever small way they can to that history... as a means of reclaiming themselves" (190). *The God of Small Things* is an achronological mosaic of memories that intimately imitates Rahel and Estha's shattered psyches slowly piecing themselves together. Author Joelle Celerier-Vitasse described the novel as a "fruitful fusion of the... past and present" and its author as someone who "seems to delight in disrupting and manipulating chronology, using at will prolepses, analepses and paralepses" (69). In terms of narrative voice, Jennings argued that Roy's "'plurivocality' disrupts the unity or hegemony of national discourse in order to reveal how a nation is perhaps located in its counter-narratives" (178). The novel's polyphony

adds credibility and dimensionality to its characters and blurs lines that divide them into categories of protagonist or antagonist. All are simultaneously guilty and innocent, incriminated and forgiven.

In a similar vein, professor and critic Anthony C. Hilfer concluded in an essay that Morrison's novels are "both-and" not "either-or" (Hilfer 95). Likewise, feminist critic J. Brooks Bouson wrote of Morrison that she "forces readers to continually construct and re-construct the personal histories of her characters" (Bouson 363). The dynamism is delicate; the intricacy is inflammatory. The origins of Heed's introduction into the Cosey family, first as Christine's kindred spirit and then as Cosey's child bride, are not revealed until the reader has become invested and embedded in the world of the novel. The novel circumvents the past just as its characters procrastinate confronting their pain.

Furthermore, the novels have several motifs and symbols in common. For example, portraits represent the patriarchal nature of both families. The first chapter in *Love* is titled "Portrait," evidently an introduction to Bill Cosey's many roles both during his life and after his death (Morrison 11). In *The God of Small Things*, the front veranda contains an oil portrait of Rahel and Estha's great-grandfather with a "confident-ancestor smile," reminiscent of Cosey's "smiling welcome" (Roy 30; Morrison 178). However, readers know that these patriarchs were neither confident nor welcoming; on the contrary, they were insecure, abusive, and patronizing towards their perceived inferiors, especially members of their own families.

The novels explore themes of historical records, not just through portraiture, but through biography and genealogy. The twins' uncle Chacko "claimed to be writing a Family Biography that the Family would have to pay him not to publish" (Roy 38). He later condescendingly lectures the twins to give them "a sense of Historical Perspective" and describes history as "a

house they couldn't enter, full of whispers they couldn't understand" (52-3). Likewise, Heed tells her assistant Junior, "I'm writing a book... about my family. The Coseys. My husband's family" (Morrison 26). However, readers will discover that Heed is virtually illiterate and needs Junior to help her decipher and forge drafts of her late husband's will. Both Chacko and Heed manipulate the history they inherit as they hand it down, a postmodern remark on how words are incapable of capturing reality and, in Roy's words, an example of "History and Literature enlisted by commerce" (120).

Both novels also use overturned and overgrown rowboats to represent decay, but also the metaphorical journey that their characters undertake in order to reunite with their childhood counterparts. Roy describes the boat that Rahel and Estha take when they run away from home as "so old a boat that it had taken root... a boat-shaped patch of withered grass" (193). Likewise, the boat on which Heed and Christine lean when they reconcile is "a keeled-over rowboat long abandoned to sea grass" (Morrison 190). Both boats have been reclaimed by nature and, via decomposition, are reverting to a previous state. They have been carved out from trees, and now they are metaphorically taking root once more. The rowboats could also symbolize how society has sabotaged these characters; their means of transportation are as impaired as their means of social mobility. However, instead of acknowledging the role of larger systemic forces in disrupting their development, they can only blame one another or vaguely mourn their loss of innocence.

The subsequent symbol related to loss of innocence is the snake. Christine's mother, May, describes Heed as a "snake: penetrating, undermining, sullyng, devouring" (Morrison 99). Christine joins in, describing Heed as a "high-heeled snake" that "rob[bed] her future just as she had ripped off her past" (Morrison 25). She later returns to the motif and compares Heed to an

“insane viper” or a “snake... destroying the balance of her life” (167, 165). Roy utilizes a snake simile as well, but in a broader sense. Her tenor is not a person, but a concept related to the loss of innocence: “Gloom swallowed the garden. Whole. Like a python” (Roy 181). The coupling of the garden and the snake relate back to the paradise of childhood innocence before corruption was introduced. However, rather than a personified abstraction, Christine and her mother blame Heed as the origin of sin and filth that destroyed the romanticized paradise of their lives.

Although situated in opposite corners of the globe, both societies attempt to cloak their injustices by creating prototypical paradises that are accessible to just enough people as to make them seem attainable or desirable to the excluded. Just as the family’s manufacturing facility in Ayemenem is ironically named “Paradise Pickles and Preserves,” Cosey describes the hotel as “a paradise” (Roy 30; Morrison 18). However, the reality is far from idyllic. The odor emanating from nearby food processing facilities in both novels symbolizes poverty, affecting the profitability of tourist attractions for wealthy white people. Roy’s white tourists are more tolerant in their belief that “smelliness, like other peoples’ poverty, was merely a matter of getting used to” (Roy 120). However, in Morrison’s world, “The cannery, so close by, kept it [the hotel] unprofitable. The fish smell had turned his [Cosey’s] resort into a joke” (Morrison 8).

In addition to greater socioeconomic issues, the adults in the children’s lives face infrastructural corruption, especially from local law enforcement. When the twins’ mother, Ammu, attempts to report her side of a tragic event, the inspector “tapped her breasts with his baton... [he] seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn’t. Policemen have that instinct” (Roy 9-10). Meanwhile, adult Heed is reluctant to deal with law enforcement, knowing how her parents and grandparents have bribed them in the past. She wonders if the chief of police will want “sex or just her humiliation; or maybe the money he’d come for plus a

quick feel” (Morrison 187). The despotism of the wealthy and the police, both of whom are virtually exempt from the law, maintains the local poverty of which they are in denial. Gradually this contributes to the crumbling community infrastructure because, like in the prototypical paradises, “The decline under way even then was kept invisible until it was impossible to hide” (34).

Because of these infrastructural fissures, the adults in the children’s lives, especially their parents, are rendered incapable of fulfilling their own dreams and become complicit in the ruination of their children’s dreams. For example, in *The God of Small Things*, Ammu is introduced as having “the cold knowledge that, for her, life had been lived” (Roy 38). Both novels explicate how families founded on absent fathers and unstable mothers fail to support their children’s social and emotional development, especially when their children face additional trauma during their formative years. Both Morrison and Roy write mother figures as three-dimensional beings who frequently violate norms dictating that motherhood is the equivalent of martyrdom. Ammu and May are tender and protective at times, erratic and volatile at others. Roy wrote that Ammu, Estha and Rahel’s mother, had “the infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber” (44). Her own trauma transfers to her treatment of them, because “their wide-eyed vulnerability and their willingness to love people who didn’t really love them exasperated her and sometimes made her want to hurt them – just as an education, a protection” (Roy 42). Likewise, Christine’s mother May gradually descended into paranoia, becoming “crazy-like-a-fox” in order to “keep going, to protect what was hers” (Morrison 99). May and Ammu send their children away with good intentions, unaware that they have not escaped from childhood unscathed by trauma and that this distance will deepen those wounds.

In terms of those wounds, a crucial theme exhibited in both works is how sexual trauma at the hands of seemingly beloved mentors can sever nearly inseparable children, whether best friends or fraternal twins. Prior to the devastating trauma, the twins “thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us,” later describing themselves as having “joint identities” (Roy 4-5). As children, they “had never been old enough (together) to know what shyness was” (88). Likewise, Christine and Heed remember their childhood as void of innocence as a concept “because no one had dreamed up hell” (Morrison 190). Morrison honors Heed and Christine’s unusual bond with the broad, moving statement, “If such children find each other before they know... color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny that they can never live without” (199). Both pairs of children also invented means of communicating that were indecipherable to outsiders. Rahel and Estha entertained themselves by reading and speaking backwards, which frustrated their adult mentors (Roy 58). Heed and Christine spoke to one another using “the words they had invented for secrets in a language they called ‘idagay’” (Morrison 188). This similarity remarks on how even their invented languages could not encompass the trauma they survived, or, conversely, how trauma necessitates the invention of new language.

Despite the children’s creative versatility, the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, or CSA, drives its victims to seek out unhealthy relationships or self-isolate out of shame and guilt until a less-than-ideal resolution of the conflict in their adulthood. In *Love*, Heed and Christine are exposed to the pedophilic nature of Christine’s grandfather and Heed’s later spouse. The resulting shame corrodes the girls’ friendship into ruthless rivalry until Heed’s eventual death. In *The God of Small Things*, young Estha is sexually assaulted by a charismatic movie theater employee. He gradually succumbs to selective mutism until he and his twin sister Rahel share a

sexual encounter upon reuniting in adulthood. During the incidents of sexual assault, both novels use egg whites as an innocuous metaphor for semen from a child's perspective. Roy describes Estha's hands after the assault as "wet and hot and sticky" with "egg white on it" (99). Likewise, when Christine witnesses her grandfather masturbating to the memory of touching Heed, she thinks that his wrist is "moving with the same speed L used to beat egg whites into unbelievable creaminess" (Morrison 192). This metaphor emphasizes the children's innocence, while readers will recognize what the perpetrators have done and anticipate the effect it has on their victims.

In terms of those effects, the children's immediate post-traumatic responses are similar as well. Estha and Christine both vomit, perhaps in an attempt to purge their bodies of the memories and sensations they wish to forget (Roy 102; Morrison 191). When they are unable to rid themselves of the memory, they succumb to guilt and self-loathing. They have no one to tell them that, as Roy wrote of her characters, "'You're not the Sinners. You're the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the *victims*, not the perpetrators'" (182). Estha and Heed share the overwhelming anxiety that their loved ones will be disgusted if they confide in them about the assaults. Estha fears "that if Ammu found out about what he had done with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, she'd love him less" (Roy 108). Similarly, "Heed thinks Christine knows... there is something wrong with her... she had started it – not him" (Morrison 191-2). Victims of childhood sexual abuse frequently blame themselves or believe that they instigated the assault somehow. Both Heed and Estha view themselves as active agents, rather than passive victims, in their trauma, possibly even "the worst transgressors" (Roy 31). Only their closest peers grieve along with them, even though they never confide in one another. Rahel shares "the sadness of whatever the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man had done to Estha" (Roy 110). Heed and Christine "had never been able to share a certain twin shame. Each one thought

the rot was hers alone” (Morrison 190). In this metaphor, Heed and Christine are compared to twins, while Estha and Rahel’s literal twinhood is the source of their emotional closeness and, perhaps, a catalyst to their shame, since the loss of such vulnerable authenticity and love is even greater.

Through unconventional and even taboo means, both pairs of protagonists narrowly succeed in closing the rift between themselves and their childhood loves. Wardi observes that Heed and Christine “come to realize, though late in life, that their strongest desire is for one another” (213). Meanwhile, Rahel and Estha were consistently aware of the reciprocal nature of their bond. For them, “incest seems only to be the desire of reintegration... to fulfill... their dream of primordial totality” (Celerier-Vitasse 78-9). Like that of Heed and Christine, Rahel and Estha’s reunion is a return to childhood symbiosis. Their mutual bond “evokes their nostalgia for the golden age... their pre-lapsarian dream” (75-6). Through same-sex and incestuous desire, both pairs of characters transgress the Love Laws in order to restore their long-lost authenticity and intimacy. Heed and Christine’s “postmortem embrace” can be likened to Rahel and Estha’s posttraumatic consummation (Wardi 214). Despite the intrinsic nature of both dynamics, reconciliation was not inevitable. As Morrison admitted in a commencement speech at Wellesley College, “I’m not certain that somehow, perhaps, a burgeoning *ménage a trois* of political interests, corporate interests and military interests will not prevail and literally annihilate an inhabitable, humane future” (Morrison qtd. in Wellesley). As victims of exploitation at the hands of pedophilia, bureaucratic corruption, and racism, these characters were almost guaranteed to fail to achieve self-actualization.

If a civilization’s success can be judged by the welfare of its most vulnerable members, and children of color are globally neglected and exploited by colonized societies, then their

damaged psyches are microcosms of their societies' national consciousness. Jennings agrees that Rahel and Estha, "in spite of their complicities with that system of oppression, are the truly dispossessed in this society" (183). She argues that the "institutionalized violence of both the family and the state... are perhaps universal to all civilizations... that found themselves on rejecting what they deem to be other" (194-195). However, the presence of large-scale tragedies renders even the most vulnerable members of a society incapable of claiming their trauma. In Roy's words, "Various kinds of despair competed for primacy... *personal* despair could never be desperate enough... because Worse Things had happened" (20). The children in both novels blame themselves for atrocities that came from greater societal failures.

As a result, the children and the societies they epitomize yearn for a past that was doomed from the beginning because of these failures. Jennings argues that while *The God of Small Things* "mourns the children's loss of innocence, it also recognizes that the innocence of the historical past is an illusion because it never, in fact, existed" (193). Celerier-Vitasse emphasizes the twins' "yearning for fusion and wholeness... for the golden age, for a protective refuge beyond any human record" (79). Therefore, nostalgia for a nonexistent "golden age" will not heal trauma, but reparations for the future might. Likewise, Bousoon argues that the focus of *Love* is the "misspent, indeed, deformed lives of Heed and Christine, who, only in the extremity of death, risk loving each other and thus are able to recover and cherish the... authentic and 'beloved' part of their selves" (373). If their reunion, and that of Rahel and Estha, is the successful consummation of long-lost authenticity and love, then to heal from national and global atrocities will require the vulnerable, the neglected, and the exploited to cease from blaming themselves and one another for their mass trauma and transgress the Love Laws dictating what a paradise is and who belongs there.

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