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# POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE ROLE OF THE BOOKER PRIZE IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* (1997) AND *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS* (2006)

## Abstract

This article discusses the Man Booker Prize winning novels *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai. The Booker Prize, having been awarded to a number of Indian English writers over the decades, has contributed to the popularity of Indian writing in English, promoting knowledge and raising awareness on different social, cultural and linguistic concerns relating to India. However, *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss*, through their non-linear narrative in English also depict the effects of Westernisation and globalisation in the postcolonial Indian society. This argument leads to a discussion of the narratives, and the themes these deal with, as examples of contemporary Anglophone Indian novels written within a postcolonial framework, while also analysing the role of the publishing industry and the commodification processes related to prize winning novels.

## Keywords

India, postcolonialism, literature, Anglophone literatures, The Booker Prize, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

> The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in. John Berger, that most wonderful writer, once wrote: Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one. There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing. So when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolutist ideology against another, but as a story-teller who wants to share her way of seeing. (Roy)[1]

The Booker Prize[2] is an annual literary award for anglophone novels which was established in 1968 and has been attributed to writers from England, Ireland, India, South Africa, Oman, the United States, among many others, over the decades. Since its establishment, the award has been given to Indian writers V.S. Naipaul in 1971 for his novel *In a Free State*; Salman Rushdie, who received the prize in 1981 for *Midnight's Children* and was further honored with the Booker of Bookers in 1993; and Aravind Adiga in 2008 for *The White Tiger*. The Booker Prize has played an essential role in the prestige and international readership the novels have received as well as what circulates internationally as Indian Writing in English. Besides the above-mentioned writers, there have also been many Indian writers long and short listed for the Booker. The Booker Prize has contributed to the diffusion and popularity of Indian Writing in English, with the "canonisation of postcolonial authors and their works", although "cultural commentators" have argued that the prize is also responsible for "circulating [postcolonial authors] as commodities" (Mendes, 2009: 24). However, I will further add that the Booker Prize has also been significant in the promotion of knowledge, interest and awareness of social, cultural and political concerns relating to India as introduced and raised by the authors.

In this article, I will focus on novels by two female Indian authors who were awarded the Booker Prize by discussing the narratives, the themes and how the award, despite the wide recognition of the quality of the novels, has contributed to their popularity and to increased interest in writing from India. Arundhati Roy received the prize for *The God of Small Things* in 1997, becoming the first female Indian author writing in English to be awarded the prize, and Kiran Desai for *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006, being the youngest female writer to get the award, continuing what Rushdie, "the gatekeeper of Indian writing in English" (Mendes, 2009: 27), had already begun a decade earlier: an international demand for more Indian Writing in English, considered by some

[1] This is taken from a transcript of Roy's reading and conversation with Howard Zinn at Lensic Performing Arts Center Santa Fe, New Mexico, 18 September 2002. https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/come-september/217403

[2] Since 2019 the former Man Booker Prize has been known as the Booker Prize, so it is the latter name that will be referred for the purposes of this article.

critics and cultural analysts as "the postcolonial exotic" (Huggan, 1997, quoted in Mendes, 2009: 24).

## 2. THE AUTHORS

In the interest of the arguments I will develop in this article, it is relevant to begin with some biographical context on the writers. Arundhati Roy was born in India in 1961 and lives in Delhi. Her father was Bengali, and her mother a Syrian Christian. She studied architecture and before beginning her career as a writer, she wrote film scripts and had a small role in one of the films she wrote. The main thrust of Roy's work has been in political activism. Over the years she has written two novels and over a dozen non-fiction books, as well as chapters in collections and newspaper articles, not to mention interviews and talks attacking global capitalism and raising awareness on environmental and human rights issues. Before the publication of *The God of Small Things,* Roy wrote two articles for which she was condemned. However, following the success of the novel she returned to social and political activism suggesting that "in India as elsewhere some questions are too urgent to be left to the novelist" (Jack, 2015: 11). But in an interview to *The Guardian* in 2017 Roy stated: "to me there is nothing higher than fiction. Nothing. It is fundamentally who I am. I am a teller of stories. For me, that's the only way I can make sense of the world, with all the dance that it involves." (qtd. In Aitkenhead, 2017). Twenty years after *The God of Small Things*, in 2017, Roy published her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

Kiran Desai is the daughter of Indian writer Anita Desai, author of *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) to mention just a few of her mother's novels. She was born in New Delhi in 1971 and lived in India in her early years but moved with her parents to the UK and then to the United States where she pursued her college education and began her career as a writer. She was still a creative writing student when she wrote her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* in 1998, and completed her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* for which she was awarded the Booker Prize in 2006. She currently lives in New York City without having published any works to date. It is relevant to mention that even though Kiran was called "an outsider" by Louise Jury in her 2006 article, "Outsider Desai is youngest woman to win Man Booker" in *The Independent*, the author of *The Inheritance of Loss* was no stranger to neither literary critics nor to the Booker. Besides the fact that she was the daughter of Anita Desai, shortlisted for the Booker three times and awarded several other prizes for her writing, Rushdie had also played a fundamental part in promoting her work, implying that this "familiarity" may be part of the logic behind the prize winners (Mendes, 2009).

Although essentially different in plot, location, and characters, both novels deal with parts of the history, culture, politics, religion and society of post-colonial India.

Central to the narratives are issues related to family, gender, caste, diaspora and the effects of capitalism and globalization on late 20th century Indian society. However, the novels also deal with more abstract concepts such as trauma, transgression, isolation and oppression.

## 3. READING *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* AND *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS* AS POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES

Post-colonial[3] literatures and cultures such as those of India exist because of the colonial past the nation was subjected to. But what makes a text postcolonial besides the time and place in which it
was produced? In this article I am going to delve into the postcolonial as a literary model to understand why *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss* are considered postcolonial texts. In my discussion of the two novels, my aim is to explore, first, common characteristics the novels share, literary styles and themes that these novels embody withing the context of postcolonial literature in India. Second, I will briefly present opposing arguments about the novels and authors and the value of their authenticity as narratives from India by "indigenous" Indian writers. Third and last, I will analyse the role that the Booker Prize has played in the global proliferation of the postcolonial Indian Writing in English.

I will begin with a brief summary of the novels. *The God of Small Things* is mostly set in 1969 in Ayemenem, a town in the southern Indian state of Kerala, where a large part of the population is Syrian Christian, and the official language is Malayalam. Ayemenem was also the first state in India and the world to elect a Communist party for government. This is important to mention since many of the characters are communists (Comrade Pillai, Chacko, Velutha) and central to the novel is Roy's critique of the communist party and its failure to deal with the inequalities of caste. The story is told through the experience of the twins, Estha and Rahel, who as children lived with their mother Ammu, grandparents Mammachi and Pappachi and their great aunt Baby Kochama. The story spans over three generations in the Ipe family history, 23 years in total, since the twins are reunited in 1993, though the actual plot occupies only 14 days surrounding the tragic event of the death by drowning of young Sophie Mol, the twin's Anglo-English cousin, daughter of their uncle Chacko. One other crucial theme in the story is the romantic relationship between Ammu and Velutha and the implications the relationship has in the unravelling of events in the story. Velutha is a carpenter who works

[3] In this text, the hyphenated form 'post-colonial' is going to be used to refer to the period that followed colonialism, while the unhyphenated form 'postcolonial' is going to be applied when referring to the social, cultural and political implications the period had on the literature, theory and criticism that emerged following the end of colonialism.

at Paradise Pickles and Preserves, the Ipe family factory and the son of Vellya Paapen, a Paravan in the Hindu caste system who was never allowed to step into the Ipe family home because of his (lower) social and religious status.

*The Inheritance of Loss* is set in 1986 in the town of Kalimpong in the North Indian state of West Bengal, close to the border with Nepal and home to many Nepali Indians. The main characters in the story are Jemmu Patel a retired judge who lives in his house, Cho Oyu, his grandaughter Sai, an orphaned girl who has come to live with him, and his dog, Mutt, the cook and his son, Biju, and Gyan, Sai's tutor. The story develops through a series of events in the 1980s during the Ghorka uprising and moves from the kitchens of New York restaurants, where Biju is doing odd jobs as an illegal immigrant, and Kalimpong, where the other characters remain throughout the entire story and to where Biju eventually returns. The story shifts from Jemmu's past, his education at Cambridge and marriage to Nimi, to Sai's upbringing with English nuns and her romance with her Nepali tutor Gyan who, as she later discovers, is part of the GNLF (Ghorka National Liberation Front).

To understand what makes *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss* postcolonial narratives, it is first necessary to define what postcolonial represents as a theoretical perspective and literary category. In 1978 Edward Said wrote "the Orient was almost a European invention" referring to how the Orient was constructed, studied and represented by 'the Occident' in academia and in the arts and literature since the late 18$^{th}$ century (Said, 2006: 24). By this claim, Said was affirming that "the Orient" had no agency in the writing of its history or experience outside of the model defined by Orientalist thought. The end of colonialism brought many social, political and cultural changes to 'new' nations such as India, changes which were manifested through a 'crisis of identity' (King, 2002: 3) in light of the impact of modernization and Western capitalism on local cultures. As part of these transformations new narratives of experience emerged to include the representation of oppressed subjects, which in most cases were written in the language of the coloniser, "addressing itself to empire rather than a specific region or community" (Gopal, 2009: 6). The aim of literatures in the early years of post-colonialism was to reclaim a 'lost' history and the rewriting of the nation, first in modernist tradition and later through a post-modernist approach and the magic-realism of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (King, 2002: 8). According to King, "major writers of this period, including Achebe, Soyinka, and Walcott, tend to be concerned with problems of bi-culturalism, the relationship of nationalist assertion to universalism, as well as critically examining what their newly independent nations were doing with their freedom" (2002: 6).

The emerging nation state of India gave the Indian novel in English a motif for expression, especially for those writers who managed to establish a connection with European socio-political thought and concerns following decolonization. In Gopal's

words, it is not "so much that the nation is a 'narrated entity' in itself as that the narration of nation gave the Anglophone novel in India its earliest and most persistent thematic preoccupation, indeed its raison d'être, as it attempted to carve out a legitimate space for itself" (2009: 6). However, with the passing of the decades, Indian writing in English as well as other postcolonial, indigenous or local literatures had "become self-generating, taking on new themes, and by now having their own traditions, models, characteristics, history, and affiliations as well as being grounded in national and regional life" (King 2002: 9), gaining recognition and identity beyond the narration of nation by channelling the authors' experience and beliefs through writing.

Roy and Desai's novels although not produced immediately after the end of the colonial era, were written at a time when decolonisation and defining an Indian postcolonial identity was (and still is) a major concern. Written and published decades after Independence, they are still considered postcolonial because they depict the social, political and cultural struggles of post-Independence India, such as language politics, migration, caste, gender and social injustice. Furthermore, as Elleke Boehmer states, "Postcolonial literatures (anglophone, francophone, lusophone, etc.) proliferate and change constantly, even as postcolonial critical studies in the academy continue to grow apace" (Boehmer, 2005: 214). On their part, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that post-colonialism "is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2006: 2). Post-colonial literally means 'after colonialism' and in a more traditional understanding is connected to a reappropriation of a colonial past by introducing new perspectives on society, culture and the coloniser's version of history. However, it also explores and represents the epistemic injustice caused by imperial ideologies on oppressed subjects in the decolonised nation and in the diaspora as on ongoing processes in different socio-political circumstances.

In the late 20th century, formerly "overlooked" (Boehmer, 2005) groups which included women, indigenous, lower-caste and diasporic, also termed "subaltern"[4] by Gayatri Spivak in her ground-breaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988),[5] gained visibility by adding their voices to the discourse, decentralising postcolonial literatures from what had up till then been a "male-centred vision of national destiny" (Boehmer, 2005: 216). Roy and Desai's narratives, therefore, integrate themselves into this expanded understanding of what postcolonial literature has come to include as both writers "participate actively in the ongoing process of decolonising culture" by dealing with female oppression, exposing patriarchal traditions and critically reflecting on the impact of Western influence (Katrak, 2006: 240) on Indian society and culture. Through their texts and representing Indian women as a general social and cultural category, regardless

[4] "Subaltern" in this context refers to people who occupy a 'lower' position in relation to others.

[5] "Can the Subaltern Speak?" was first published in Cary, Nelson & Grossberg, Nelson (1988) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. University of Illinois Press.

of other factors of difference, Roy and Desai have become active agents of their history through their representation of different aspects of postcolonial India. Even though their narratives are in English, rather than a vernacular language, by telling their stories, sharing knowledge on local realities and "creating spaces of resistance and hope" (Smith, 2021: 4), Roy and Desai can be considered authentic voices of India and even indigenous writers.

As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state, "post-colonial literatures are a result of this interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1). With the Independence of India, following almost 350 years of British colonial rule and the imposition of the English language on the Indian peoples, Indian English writing became a medium of expression for postcolonial India resulting in a "vibrant and powerful mixture of imperial language and local experience" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2006: 1). Said's *Orientalism* (1978), as previously discussed, characterised the 'Orient' as an ideological construction of the West. However, with decolonisation, a new phenomenon emerged where the colonised used the language of the coloniser to 'strike back' and in this way 're-Orientalising' their experience as Indians, as explored by Lau and Mendes (2011). To quote Jason Cowley, "'a single shelf of a good European library,' wrote Macaulay in 1835, 'is worth the whole native literature.' The Indian writers of this century have enacted a thrilling revenge of Macaulay - Roy included" (Cowley, 1997).

As highlighted by Lau and Mendes, re-Orientalism is a concept which has been debated by scholars since around the 80s even though termed differently (Carrier refers to ethno-Orientalism in 1992, Dirlik to self-Orientalism in 1996, and Boehmer to Neo-orientalism in 1998 (Lau and Mendes, 2011: 2)). However, their view of 'self-Orientalism' or 're-Orientalism' looks at how, despite the end of colonialism in India, imperialism still found a way to shape cultural production in the Orient and to control how it is marketed in and for the Occident. This theory makes sense considering the number of Indian English texts which were awarded the Booker Prize in every decade between the 70s and the 2000s since "the concept of re-Orientalism offers a more complex understanding of the power dynamics involved in postcolonial cultural production and in the way that producers (be they creative authors or academics) and the texts, critically engage with those dynamics" (Lau and Mendes, 2011: 3).

Seventy-five years after India gained Independence, the concept of the postcolonial—encompassing theory, literature and culture—has evolved and adjusted to emerging social and political realities in the nation-state as well as in the diaspora. The areas of culture and society included in postcolonial critical theory now include issues relating to race, migration, refugees, indigeneity, minority, ethnic and religious groups. The focus has shifted to the decolonisation of culture and the importance of shifting or broadening the field of action in academia, aiming at a more inclusive understanding of

the past and a plural approach to the present. Considering this, the postcolonial text plays an increasingly important role in articulating contemporary issues such as social equality, indigenous rights, and cultural diversity/difference in the fictional representation of the "cultural metamorphosis" occurring in India and in the diaspora as a result of colonisation and the more recent effects of globalisation.

Postcolonial texts contribute to the construction of the "idea of India" by focusing on "parts"—ethnic and religious difference, languages, minority groups—that make up the whole India (Gopal, 2009: 13). In these two texts specifically, it is the experience and perspective of the subaltern—women, the lower classes and castes, migrants, and other minority groups such as the Nepalis of India in *The Inheritance of Loss*—whose stories are told. Both novels give voice to those left unheard. *The God of Small Things* denounces social and religious inequalities in Kerala, while an important theme in *The Inheritance of Loss* is the representation of the Gorkha National Liberation Front's (GNLF) demands for an independent Gorkhaland. Differences in class and caste are represented and contrasted through the characters of the judge and the cook, as well as through Sai and Gyan (*The Inheritance of Loss*); Pappachi, Mammachi, Vellya Paapen, Velutha and his brother (*The God of Small Things*); women of different generations are represented in the characters of Sai, Noni and Nimi in *The Inheritance of Loss*, and Ammu, Rahel, Baby Kochama and Mammachi in *The God of Small Things*; migrants are represented in the character of Biju (*The Inheritance of Loss*) and in the anglophiles Chacko (*The God of Small Things*) and Lola and Noni (*The Inheritance of Loss*). The characters in the stories, with their different experiences, traumas and suffering, their beliefs and personal battles play an active role in the construction of India's post-colonial society dealing with its own national and cultural identity.

## 4. ANALYSING POSTCOLONIAL THEMES IN THE NOVELS

When analysing *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss* it is possible to find analogies in the themes and style with characteristics of postcolonial writing, as I will proceed to explain with a few examples. The prize-winning novels both explicitly challenge institutionalised structures and cultural expectations of what an Indian or an English text should look like by creating a new form that fuses Indian and English/British elements through the creative use of language, the literary devices and the non-linear narratives. The narratives play and mix languages through codeswitching (mixing English and Hindi in sentences) and the transgression of linguistic boundaries and neither novel follows a linear structure. Both authors parody British, colonial or Western cultural symbols in the stories, deconstructing colonial structures and showing that, within a postcolonial reading, there are alternative readings of India.

In *The God of Small Things*, the twins show Miss Mitten, Baby Kochamma's Australian missionary friend "how it was possible to read both *Malayalam* and *Madam I'm Adam* backwards as well as forwards" (Roy, 1997: 60) which shocks her. As a punishment "they were made to write *In future we will not read backwards. In future we will not read backwards*. A hundred times. Forwards" (Roy, 1997: 60). Using this part of the twin's experience to support my argument, *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The God of Small Things* do not follow a linear, chronological order and so the story is also read backwards and forwards, remaining open to interpretation and symbolising that one can return to, reclaim and rewrite the past through different perspectives. Similarly, Sai tells herself, "never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own tiny happiness and live safely within it" (Desai, 2006: 323).

The creative use of English found in Indian postcolonial writing as employed by writers such as in Rushdie, Roy, Desai, Aravind Adiga or Avni Doshi, while assuming a historical and ideological relation with the language and Britain, it also represents an overturning of the dominant power relations. By deconstructing, distorting, playing with the language and reproducing it, the postcolonial text reveals its creativity. As Zabus contends,

> When 'the Empire writes back to the centre', it does so not so much with a vengeance as 'with an accent', by using a language that topples discourse conventions of the so-called 'centre' and inscribing postcolonial language variants from the 'margin' or the 'periphery' in the text. Such variants result from the transformation of language through local use, itself the result of social change. Yet the inscription of variants within a text often goes beyond the mere recording of such a transformation. The writer then no longer imitates what is happening as a result of social change but uses language variance as an alibi to convey ideological variance. (2002: 34)

Like Paradise Pickles and Preserves, the Ipe family business, which "lay between the house and the river" (Roy, 1997: 30) Indian Writing in English created a new space and new form of expression. Being "too thick for jelly and too thin for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said" (Roy, 1997: 30), even though "classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question" (Roy, 1997: 31). The defiance of authority and the transgression of 'laws' too is a common theme in both novels. In *The God of Small Things* everything "really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (Roy, 1997: 33). Ammu and Velutha had transgressed the Love Laws for being of different castes and social classes (in the eyes of the society they were a part of). However, in a society undergoing many transformations, it wasn't just Ammu and Velutha who had broken the laws. As Rahel reflects, "Perhaps, Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden

territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that made grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly." (Roy, 1997: 31).

In *The Inheritance of Loss* the changing forms and the fluid, in-between nature of identity in the postcolonial society can be connected to the stylistic devices Desai uses to describe characters and their experiences. To quote from the novel, Sai's feeling of 'fluidity' may be interpreted as a metaphor for the disintegration of the hierarchies and divisions caused by colonial domination. ""No news," Sai lied and went red thinking of Gyan. Companionship had increased the sensation of fluidity she'd felt before the mirror, that reduction to malleable for, the endless possibility for reinvention" (Desai, 2006: 132). These metaphors of change, of fluidity, of transgression, of deconstruction allude to India, to its cultural identity and to how it has gained a form of its own that resists imperialism. As Boehmer asserts, "[g]iven their transgressive dispersed energies, the criticism reads postcolonial texts (novels more generatively than poems) as symptomatic of the centrifugal pull of history. They are believed to demonstrate the fragility of 'grand narratives'; the erosion of transcendent authority; the collapse of imperialistic explanations of the world." (2005: 238). Nevertheless, despite this agency, this voice and authority of Indian authors, the question remains on how much is still controlled by Western markets and how the Booker is an integral part of this dynamic.

Nevertheless, it is not only the disintegration of hierarchies that are represented in the novel through references to fluidity, but also how Western forms have made their way into Indian culture and society. To some, these changes are welcomed and adopted, to others, they are still regarded with suspicion. As an example of this, Sai struggles with her Indian-English identity, trying to make sense of where she belongs. She dresses different from what would be expected of Indian girls, "Noni looked her over critically. Sai was wearing khaki pants and a T-shirt that said "Free Tibet." Her feet were bare and she wore her short hair in two untidy braids ending just before her shoulders" (Desai, 2006: 66). She talked of Christmas stating that "Christmas is an Indian holiday as much as any other" (Desai, 2006: 163) but showed no knowledge of 'other' Hindu traditions, spoke only English and "Pidgin Hindi" (Desai, 2006: 176), didn't know how to eat with her hands or squat or seem mildly interested in any other cultural practice or custom that made her an Indian Hindu. This disgusted Gyan, who tells her, "You are like slaves, that's what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself. It's because of people like you that we never get anywhere" (Desai, 2006: 163). In *The Inheritance of Loss*, changes are symbolised by the appropriation of European or American traditions such as Christmas, while similarly, in *The God of Small Things*, the impact of capitalism and globalisation on traditional societies is depicted through a parody of references to British and American culture – *The Sound of Music, The Best of Donahue, Somewhere over the Rainbow*, Bill Clinton, NBA basketball, to mention just a few, the construction of a five-

star hotel called “Heritage” from the History House in the Heart of Darkness (a direct reference to Conrad’s novella depicting the horrors of colonialism in the Congo), surrounded by “fetid garbage” and children defecating into the river (Roy, 1997: 124-125), the changes in the Ayemenem house where “Baby Kochamma had installed a dish antenna” (Desai, 2006:27), the run-down factory and how characters adjust and make sense of these changes, “now Estha couldn’t hear himself for the noise. Trains. Traffic. Music. The Stock Market. A dam had burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling. Comets, violins, parades, loneliness, clouds, beards, bigots, lists, flags, earthquakes, despair were all swept up in a scrambled swirling (Roy, 1997:14-15).

The quotes from the novels reflect the ongoing transformations in India and the divisions that exist as the cultural differences and geographical categories of East and West are reduced. In the words of Homi Bhabha, “cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity (Bhabha, 2006: 155). In his 1988 essay “Cultural Diversity and Cutural Differences” Bhabha refers to the abstract concept of the “Third Space” where meaning and “symbols of culture” are produced through the fusing of the general and the specific. However, he goes on to argue that “even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew” (Bhabha, 2006: 157).

## 5. SPEAKING FOR THE SUBALTERN IN THE NOVELS

In *The Inheritance of Loss* and in *The God of Small Things* the subaltern is provided with a space of representation, however, it is important to distinguish the difference in “representation as ‘speaking for,’ as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation,’ as in art or philosophy” (Spivak, 1993: 28). Through the inclusion of minority social groups in their narratives, the authors are ‘speaking for’ these subjects while also re-presenting their own experience to a global audience. This plays a role in the construction of social awareness of epistemic violence and injustice and in the need for the cultural recognition of oppressed groups, such as the Paravans through the character of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*, “Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched” and “In Mammachi’s time, Paravans, like other untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those they addressed” (Roy, 1997: 74).

Her tone reflects Roy’s position regarding the Indian caste system, just as her depiction of the gross injustice Velutha experiences and the violent beating he is subjected to and witnessed by the twins, as “a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions (this

was not war after all, or genocide) of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly. It was human history masquerading as God's purpose, revealing itself to an underage audience" (Roy, 1997: 309). Roy, as an activist and a novelist, feels that she has a responsibility to denounce this violence and injustice of the caste system. In a 2017 interview to *The Guardian* following the publication of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* she is quoted as saying,

> Caste is about dividing people up in ways that preclude every form of solidarity, because even in the lowest castes there are divisions and sub-castes, and everyone's co-opted into the business of this hierarchical, silo-ised society. This is the politics of making a grid of class, of caste, of ethnicity, of religion. And then making the grid ever more fine is very much part of how you rule the world, saying, 'You're a Muslim, you're a Hindu, you're a Shia, you're a Sunni, you're a Barelvi, you're a Brahmin, you're a Saraswat Brahmin, you're a Dalit, you're gay, you're straight, you're trans – and only you can speak for yourself, and there's no form of solidarity being allowed.' So what people think of as freedom is really slavery (Roy in Aitkenhead 2017)[6].

In *The Inheritance of Loss* Desai also makes a point of raising awareness to another forgotten group, the sherpas, by telling the story of Tenzing Norgay, the first man to reach the top of Mount Everest in 1953, even though it is Edmund Hillary who is remembered for this feat:

> Sai and Gyan had recently made an excursion to see these socks of Tenzing, spread-eagled in the Darjeeling museum adjoining his memorial, and they had taken a good look at them. They had also studied his hat, ice pick, rucksack, samples of dehydrated foods that he might have taken along, Horlicks, torches, and samples of moth and bats of the high Himalayas.
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> "He was the real hero, Tenzing," Gyan had said. "Hilary couldn't have made it without the sherpas carrying his bags." Everyone around had agreed. Tenzing was certainly first, or else he was made to wait with the bags so Hilary could take the first step on behalf of that colonial enterprise of sticking your flag on what was not yours.
>
> Sai had wondered, Should humans conquer the mountain or should they wish for the mountain to possess them? Sherpas went up and down, ten times, fifteen times in some cases, without glory, without claim of ownership, and there were those who said it was sacred and shouldn't be sullied at all. (Desai, 2006: 155)

This telling of Tenzing's story, although not written or told by a sherpa, can be understood as a "strategy of recuperation" (Griffiths 2006: 165) and becomes a form of resistance to a dominant European culture and imperial ideology that have shaped knowledge. Nonetheless, the question remains of who has the right to speak for whom and who gets to select culturally representative texts that voice the experience of oppressed, colonised,

[6] Taken from an interview of Arundhati Roy by Decca Aitkenhead "'Fiction takes its time': Arundhati Roy on why it took 20 years to write her second novel". *The Guardian*, 27 May 2017.

dominated or subaltern subjects. To quote Griffiths, "even when the subaltern appears to 'speak' there is a real concern as to whether what we are listening to is really a subaltern voice, or the subaltern being spoken by the subject position they occupy within the larger discursive economy" (2006: 167). This leads my discussion back to the Man Booker Prize and the role it has played in the proliferation of Indian writing in English.

## 6. THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE AND THE POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

As asserted by Claire Squires, "statistical evidence clearly demonstrates the impact of the Booker Prize on sales and figures of Booker winners and also shortlisted titles" (2007: 87). It can be argued that the prize selects novels in English that focus on different social and cultural themes of the English-speaking world drawing attention to the issues, the forms of language and the culture being represented. On the other hand, the Booker shapes the "desperate yearning for authenticity – that characterizes so much of what passes for Indian writing in the West" (Kumar 1999: 101) creating the sense that its form and content is designed for the Western audience or "critical mass". Moreover, as Squires has further argued, the Booker Prize has been essential to the rise of contemporary Anglophone writing which has spread through the English language markets worldwide (Squires, 2007: 87). In sum, not only are these texts defining what and who should be written about, but also how and who gets the prizes. The main question here on the matter of authenticity is whether a "small group of British educated literary writers of Indian origin" and their prize-winning novels are acknowledged as representative of India, its society, the locations where they are set and the political events being dealt with, locally, meaning in India, as put forward by Daniel Allington (2014).

The Booker Prize choices tend to be received with some level of criticism, nevertheless, and as reinforced by Squires, "the Booker Prize is perceived by many to be an indicator of quality, and hence the Prize's aim of awarding the 'very best in contemporary fiction' is seen to be a sign of the health of the literary marketplace (The Man Booker Prize for Fiction 2005a) (Squires, 2007: 87). Rushdie, Roy, Desai and Adiga have all been awarded the Man Booker Prize over the last forty years and many other Indian writers have been short and long listed for the prize. "The 'attention profiles' extracted from the diverse publications are completed with the perspectives of academics, publishers, book-sellers, readers and 'advanced' readers" (Auguscik, 2017: 113). In this sense, the novel becomes an object of further debate, interpretation and criticism, not only of the narrative itself, but of the author and the culture they are representing. And the critique can be direct, blunt and harsh. Amitava Kumar classifies Kiran Desai's style as reflecting the "dismay and ignorance of the distant cosmopolitan" who portrays an empty India with a language "delicate and lyrical filling a cupboard with spices and fauna" that maintains its distance from what is really happening (1999: 84) while criticising Roy for

creating a fantasy world "free from patriarchal violence, misogyny and the savagery of untouchability" (Kumar, 1999: 91).

The Booker provides a 'safe haven' for writers allowing them to recreate the India they know and the India that sells. Moreover, sales increase for the winner, the short and long listed because of the branding of the Booker on the book cover, "the strapline 'Booker Prize Winner' thus becomes part of a wider marketing mix set to build on the book's achievements in the eyes of the judges. Hence, particularly with the bigger literary awards and certainly with the Booker, floor and window space is given over to displays of the shortlist and to the eventual winner" (Squires, 2007: 88). The result is that, as Mendes has argued, rather than "prizing "otherness" (Huggan, 2007) the award is "prizing sameness" (Mendes, 2009). The postcolonial author and postcolonial text author become a category or a "template" of writers that tell stories of the geo-political location or socio-cultural content they are classified by.

Indian writing in English has expanded its themes to the representation of subjects which are relevant to postcolonial India and Indian culture in the 20th and 21st century. However, can this be considered yet another form of a dominant of ideology where knowledge, voice and agency are "collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the west, back to those who have been colonised" (Smith, 2021: 1)?

Colonialism and the writing of history created imbalances and instability in power relations which led to domination, oppression and silencing. With the end of the colonial era, new voices and forms of expression emerged that sought to deepen knowledge on postcolonial nations and peoples, and their respective processes of decolonisation. As argued by Tuhiwai Smith, indigenous narratives, "serve to tell an alternative story: the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonized. These counter-stories are powerful forms of resistance which are repeated and shared across diverse indigenous communities" (Smith, 2021: 2). Can Roy and Desai's texts be accommodated into this understanding of indigenous stories? Even though, as I have been arguing, texts such as *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss* and others by postcolonial Indian writers are, in a way, 'made' by the Booker, they are nonetheless, important texts in the construction of a deeper, more inclusive understanding of Indian literature, culture and history. It is, therefore, essential to the ongoing debate on postcolonial India that Indian Writing in English keeps expanding the limits of what stories are told and by whom, offering "ways of articulating, of putting into play, this justice-and respect-driven struggle" (Boehmer, 2005: 258). In line with Bahri and Menozzi's (2021: 11) claim, "contemporary" Indian English "authors offer politically conscious, critical interventions". It is, therefore, equally important that the Booker, as other prestigious prizes, maintains its fundamental role in the selection and subsequent marketing and widespread reading of Indian Writing in English.

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