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<p style="text-align:center">The Many Gothic Monsters in *The God of Small Things*</p>

From Frankenstein's monster and Hyde to Lester Ballard and the undead zombie, the monster has been an important element in Gothic literature, particularly for its ability to act as a sort of moral mirror, reflecting on the nature of man and society. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things,* Roy employs Gothic elements to pursue a postcolonial narrative that seeks to challenge traditional structures, particularly of gender and caste. Roy utilizes elements of the Gothic monster in order to subvert not only the readers' expectations, but the form of the Gothic monster as well. By doing so, *The God of Small Things* becomes a postcolonial gothic hybrid that utilizes all of the elements of a gothic monster, but poses the question as to who that monster is.

Critic Michelle Giles argues that *The God of Small Things* firmly employs gothic elements through the use of dark imagery, the supernatural, the haunted house, the ancestral curse, a threatening atmosphere, doubling, and incest to personalize larger cultural horrors of India" (Giles 1). Noting the seemingly inherent contradiction of a postcolonial gothic novel that was written in the English language, Giles asserts that the novel is a postcolonial gothic hybrid, a text which is made to empower the marginalized through the liminal discourse. This hybridity comes in the form of the novel "both adopt[ing] and challeng[ing] Western Gothic conventions" (1). But while Giles highlights important gothic elements, she misses that of the gothic monster.

Both Velutha and Ammu, joint criminals of India's "love laws," have elements of the gothic monster in their wants, actions, and reactions. Velutha's search for companionship in the Marxist movement and ultimately, in Ammu, resembles that search from the gothic monster, as

does Ammu's reciprocation for him. Their exertions of power come in the form of sexual intimacy, an act that protests the roles of gender and caste. And the reactions from those that discover their truth mimic the terror that gothic monsters summon. However, their innocent and peaceful outbursts of systematic protest do not coincide with the monster who typically acts in true horror to those around them, leaving the "true" monster's identity in question. I will explore how both Velutha and Ammu are misunderstood and labelled monsters, and in doing so, will show that the real monster of *The God of Small Things* is the Indian state. This play of multiple monsters and questionable identities proves a simultaneous evolution and subversion of the gothic monster.

Critic Ashley Craig Lancaster differentiates between the British gothic monster of old and the emergent American gothic monster, particularly in how those monsters appear to society and thus how society must deal with them. Frankenstein's monster is one of horrific countenance to the world around him, and his disconnection from humanity prevents them from seeing their own cruelty. Lester Ballard, however, is an evolution of the monster, as he looks almost indistinguishable, yet his search for companionship and godlike control end up leaving him in society's care as a lasting reflection of their failure. Lancaster explains that "By representing the human Other, American Gothicism denies readers the opportunity to dismiss these outsiders completely" (Lancaster 133). By situating Velutha, Ammu, and the Indian state, who are wholly human, in this gothic criteria, it becomes clearer how *The God of Small Things* uses a modern approach to the monster element. While not American gothic, Roy's novel is an Indian, neo gothic that conforms to Giles's estimation of the novel's other liminally gothic elements.

Velutha's backstory and search for companionship seem to fall in line with that of the gothic monster. Like other modern monsters that Giles discussed, Velutha is not unhuman, yet the caste system has rendered him different to the point of being subhuman. Untouchables "were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas" (Roy 71). The law forced those like Velutha to the shadows, and the black body that Velutha lived in made it clear that upper-caste society felt like their presence itself stained them. For a dalit man like Velutha, this oppression affected his expression of masculinity. Critic Rajeshwar Mitapalli explains that "the caste system renders the dalit experience and expression of masculinity entirely different from that of the upper-caste men; sometimes this difference is greater than the difference between men and women themselves" (Mitapalli 58). This meant that although "Velutha knew more about the machines in the factory than anyone else" (Roy 72), he wasn't allowed to fully express that knowledge lest the upper castes started to feel threatened by it. This willful repression of Velutha's masculinity caused conflicts between him and his father, and eventually he "disappeared. For four years nobody knew where he was" (Roy 73). Like other gothic monsters, Velutha felt cast out from not only greater society, but by his own family who were encultured into it.

When he did come back, his search for companionship went in two ways, in the direction of Marxism and towards Ammu. Although the stated purposes of the Marxists may have been to empower lower classes, "the Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing to" (Roy 64). Even in the Marxist ranks, Velutha was on the bottom of the rung, and at this point of social isolation, Lancaster explains that "the Monster finally realizes that he has no place in this society" (Lancaster 137). Although that might seem to

go against the fact that he finds companionship in Ammu, a more nuanced reading of this realization is that Velutha accepts the fact that he has no legitimate place in society. Since his tryst with Ammu is illegitimate, Velutha's search for companionship as a Gothic monster still falls in line with the standard, at least in how Roy frames him within a postcolonial structure.

Ammu also seeked that illegitimate companionship because she could find none in her own home. Her father would beat her and her mother, and after her failed marriage with the twins' father, Ammu was stuck between patriarchal names. As critic Olivia Bălănescu put it, Ammu "has no rights in her parents' home, being equally despised by Chacko, Mammachi and her aunt, Baby Kochamma. A wretched manless woman whose choice between her husband's name and her father's name did not give her much of a choice" (Bălănescu 59). Like Velutha, Ammu seems trapped by her own natural identity, but her enclosure as a woman is different from Velutha's. Ammu understood her restrictions as a natural thing, pointing out "that human beings were creatures of habit, and it was amazing the kind of things they could get used to. You only had to look around you… to see that beatings with brass vases were the least of them" (Roy 49). Interestingly, Ammu was not cast out physically like Velutha felt like he was, since Ammu to some degree acknowledged the patriarchal system, but nevertheless, the emotional distance that her family and society created around her as a woman made her exert the only power she felt she had. She, as with Velutha, then acts in accordance with the gothic monster that is shunned from legitimate society, becoming "the god of [their] own world" (Lancaster 144).

Velutha is dubbed as "The God of Loss" and "The God of Small Things" (Roy 274), in that his retaliation for being cast out by society has only occurred under the most powerless of circumstances. Velutha doesn't have the strength of Frankenstein's monster or the psychopathy

of Lester Ballard. He only has his black body and his emasculation, and he does with it what monsters typically do not do. He loved. This is where Roy deviates Velutha from the traditional, or even the evolving monster. A key component of the gothic monster is a behavioral "pattern of the Monster as he evolves from a kind person to a murderous villain" (Lancaster 144), yet Velutha never becomes anything resembling that. In this way, Velutha isn't a true gothic monster, but is only given its aesthetic elements in order to rhetorically question who the monster is. If anything, Ammu's actions could be seen as more violent and consistent with the gothic monster.

Although Ammu finds companionship in Velutha as he does in her, their relationships are unequal due to the caste system, and Ammu is well aware of this. In his paper, Mitapalli argues that Ammu uses her sexual capital to victimize Velutha with her sexual gaze, and eventually, her sexual acts that seal his fate. When Velutha first realizes Ammu's gaze, his "knowing slid into him cleanly, like the sharp edge of a knife" (Roy 168). Not only his knowing of the consequences, but her gaze was as sharp and dangerous as a weapon of death. Roy's description of that gaze foreshadows its power to seal his fate. Unlike Velutha who had "just stood there" (Roy 316), complicit in his own victimization, Ammu exerted much more power than the "God of Small Things" because she had more societal power. This power comes from her psychological needs, that Mittapalli identifies as her willingness "to do anything to be loved, including sacrificing her lover's life" (Mittapalli 64). While this might seem intuitively hyperbolic, it is only so with a Western societal framework in mind. The postcolonial India in which Roy's characters reside does not have such luxury, so Ammu's willingness to break the love laws could be seen as her signing Velutha's death sentence. But this will to exert power

extends to her children as well. In reaction to the twins' separation, Ammu "believed that if she refused to acknowledge the passage of time, if she willed it to stand still in the lives of her twins, it would" (Roy 152). Ammu's own will for godlike control is monsterlike in this way, although Mittapalli's claim that Ammu "behaves more or less the same way as her brother Chacko" (Mittapalli 65) is somewhat misguided, as Ammu has her own structural gender oppressions unlike her brother. In this way, Ammu seems to be more like a monster than Velutha in her exertion of power, yet she doesn't completely fulfill the gothic role either. For if it weren't for the structural inequities of a postcolonial India, Ammu's acts themselves wouldn't be any more nefarious than Velutha's. Yet they are, and the reactions from those around them signify another reason to consider them aesthetically monstrous.

Despite their love acts being the most "monstrous" form of control they exert, both Ammu and Velutha's family reacts to them as if their acts were consistent with the violence and terror of traditional gothic monsters. When Vellya Paapen sees his son crossing the physical boundaries drawn to divide the castes to go see Ammu, "the Terror took hold of him… he saw, night after night, a little boat being rowed across the river" (Roy 74). The terror that Vellya Paapen has is not unlike the terror experienced by those who come face to face with a monster. Velutha strikes terror into his father's heart, but more because of the systematic oppression. Similarly, Ammu's family realizes that, "for generations to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They'd nudge and whisper. It was all finished now" (Roy 244). While their terror will be transferred from generation to generation, it is also important to note these differences in terror. While Vellya Paapen feels terrorized because his son's life is in danger, the Ayemenem family is of a

magnitude less because their reputation will not be destroyed, but scratched. In a way, this feigning of terror could be seen as foreshadowing that Velutha and Ammu as monsters are only a top layer to the complexities of the true postcolonial monster.

Although Velutha and Ammu both have elements of the aesthetic monster in their search for companionship and exertion of godlike control, they do not match the violence or true terror typical of gothic monsters, however, the Indian state does. As a collective body, its "search for companionship" comes in the form of the caste system by defining relations as to who can love who and how. In fact, the story surrounding Ammu and Velutha "really began in the days when the Love Laws were made" (Roy 33). The institution of these laws marked a sealing of fate for the lovers, as their companionship was anathema to the state's own definition. While "the maintenance of rules of behaviour and actions specific to one's caste is secured not through individuals but through kinship units, particularly the family and the household" (Bălănescu 63), the state is the systematic structure that ultimately rules these norms. Their power to define the law and enforce it illuminates a more traditional exertion of power that gothic monsters tend to imbue. Unlike Velutha's and Ammu's acts of love, the state's acts are prohibitive and authoritarian. This power to define went much deeper than the love laws, as it infested even the most mundane of issues, like the Food Product Organization's banning of "banana jam… because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly… An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said" (Roy 30-31). This level of intrusion by the state is a tell all of how much power they have and how the caste system of division has been built with strong foundations.

Once Velutha's "crime" had come to light, he was cast to the darkness of a jail cell where he experienced the state's enforcement and judgment, which proved to show the godlike control typical of a gothic monster. The police, as the method of state enforcement, took Velutha in with ease and used violence to not only reach their intended purpose, but also their pleasure. "The policemen stopped and fanned out. They didn't really need to, but they liked these Touchable games" (Roy 291). As if they were taking cues from God's omnipotence, their relative ease to power is one not unlike a child holding a magnifying lens to ants. Velutha had not the power or privilege to be able to resist, and the police knew that. They beat him to a bloody pulp until he resembled "a pumpkin with a monstrous upside-down smile" (Roy 303). Through the focalization of someone entrenched into their caste-driven worldview, Velutha was the monster that violated Ammu. Despite their seedy tactics and obvious search for convenience over truth, they continued their violence up until his death when "someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared" (Roy 303). The state held Velutha's life in their hands and killed him with the ease of flipping a switch. Their godlike control is similar to that of the monsters of gothic literature past, however, it is much more insidious in the fact that Gothic monsters are typically feared by humanity, while in the case of *The God of Small Things*, the monster is a form of systematic humanity.

It is quite clear that the Indian state's system of caste and gender oppression dwarfs any monstrosity from Velutha and Ammu. The state's categorization as a gothic monster is apt, while Velutha's and Ammu's is useful in recognizing that they are the aesthetic and manufactured monsters that keep the wheels of the repressive system in perpetual motion. As the monster has evolved in gothic fiction it has become more human. As Lancaster notes of Lester Ballard, "by

returning to the hospital, [he] forces society to deal with his suffering and its role in his suffering" (Lancaster 146-47). Roy has taken the gothic monster, subverted it by adding faux monsters like Velutha and Ammu, but she has also evolved the gothic monster to be the state's systems of oppression. And how then does society deal with its role in suffering when they manufacture it? This is a fundamental question to *The God of Small Things* as a piece of gothic literature and it is not easily answered. The gothic monster has not only become a part of humanity, but humanity itself, and in that way, Roy creates a new liminality between the collective oppression and the individuals who inhabit it.

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