

*The phrase – “They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much.” – is repeated throughout the novel. Discuss its force and its multiple meanings in the narrative.*

This is a massive question – one which affects every character in The God of Small Things. That is to say, every character in some way crosses, or transgresses, a boundary of some sort. This, of course, is necessarily a cursory glance at the “forbidden transgressions” of most of the novel’s dominant figures.

The God of Small Things is, in many ways, a meditation on the kinds of violence that get imposed when boundaries are crossed. Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Velutha, Chacko, Margaret, Sophie Mol, Rahel, Estha – all of them suffer at least a dislocation, and, in some cases, an internal or external violence.

Ammu “tampers with the laws” from the outset (of both the novel and her life, at twenty-seven years of age) by marrying Pappachi, a charming alcoholic, but a terrible husband and father. Of course, Ammu “didn’t pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that *anything*, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn’t reply.” (39).

Worse, Ammu is seen partially through the glinting, vicious eyes of Baby Kochamma, the “incumbent baby grandaunt” (44). She resents Ammu along religious boundaries – Ammu has produced two “Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry” (44) – but also because Ammu quarrels with the “fate of the wretched Man-less woman” (45), a fate that Kochamma outwardly claims to be untouched by.

Ammu quarrels with this fate, we discover as the novel gathers tremendous speed, by taking on an Untouchable (Velutha) as a lover. He is, in many ways, the silent surrogate father to the twins; nevertheless, Ammu’s “biologically-designed dance” (317) with Velutha imbricates her in the severe systemic discrimination that the novel so powerfully laments. Ammu ends up exiled, from her children, from herself, from her biological potential, and dies very alone.

Baby Kochamma refuses to cross into forbidden territory. She is a liminal figure in the novel, always hovering on the edges of the narrative, manipulating and stroking Velutha while Mamacchi casts him into oblivion, and then spitting poisonously all over him. She has a deep understanding and fear for the way in which religion and sexuality are intertwined. She loves and fails to win Father Mulligan as a younger woman, and is only happy when he dies, because – “if anything, she possessed him in death in a way that she never had while she was alive. At least her memory of him was *hers*. Wholly hers. Savagely, fiercely, hers” (282).

Desire infiltrates her body, and almost makes it burst from the inside out. She, above all, tampers with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. She “loves” white Sophie Mol because she is “Other” to Ammu’s children. Herself a product of a hybrid union, Sophie is used as a beating-stick by Kochamma: a stick that beats alienation and the intensified feeling of otherness into the twins, both victims of erasure: one of them “Quietness,” the other “Emptiness” (311). Sophie Mol is apparently “more loved” than the twins – of particularly great concern to Rahel, who is told earlier on (by means of a stern admonition from her Ammu) that a child is possibly loved just a little less whenever they anger their parent.

Chacko, the twins’ uncle, is (or was) a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford who meets Margaret, a café waitress at the time of their meeting. Chacko has crossed into a forbidden white territory, but the novel takes pains to say that he is deeply uncomfortable with his Ayemenem roots; he more clearly identifies himself with White, educated, English life. He reaches Margaret through his laughter, and thus forces an average woman (in her mind) to love herself more than she did before she met him. But Chacko, too, is a hybrid figure, a “tortured Marxist...at war with an impossible, incurable Romantic” (232), and crosses the forbidden territory (as did his sister) of

marriage without parental consent (or knowledge, in his case). Inevitably, the marriage itself suffers the ultimate Marxist fate, in that the seeds of its destruction were sowed in its inception. Margaret turns to Joe (who we really only know as a “Joe-shaped Hole in the Universe”), himself a clichéd Englishman, and the opposite of Chacko, in that he is “Steady. Solvent. Thin” (235).

But Chacko and Margaret produce Sophie (Mol), and then they separate, and then Joe dies, and then (understanding that this is the distillation of a novel) Margaret and Sophie Mol cross into the forbidden territory of Ameyemenem – the forbiddenness felt financially (“Margaret Kochamma broke her term deposit and bought two airline tickets, London-Bombay-Kochin” [238]) and medically (Margaret brings every preventative medicine possible, but she cannot immunize against drowning).

Appropriately, The God of Small Things is concluded by two love-scenes of intense forbiddenness, one because it implies incest, the other because it crosses heavily stratified class (caste) boundaries. When the twins share one another at the end, it is clear that “what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief” (311). Arundhati Roy follows that last statement with the title quote to this paper. Only now (repeated on multiple occasions in the novel), the statement about their breaking the Love Laws is at least bitterly ironic, and – more to the point – is heavily weighted with all the implications of the destructiveness of class, sexual, and religious divisions. Estha is called “Quietness” in this scene and Rahel “Emptiness.” In brief, Estha’s quietness is brought about by his original crossing into the forbidden territory of the OrangeLemondrink Man’s slimy parlor at Abhilash Talkies. Rahel suffers emptiness in her eyes as a married woman in Washington; she suffers vast inner violation as Estha is “deported” deported by train at novel’s end; she has the fuzzy moth that flutters around her heart, nibbling away at its perimeter, every time the woman who is “Of one blood” (312) seems to love her a little less.

The last scene is one where all the other boundaries get transgressed: Velutha literally crosses the waters from the History House (a brilliant postmodern and postcolonial trope) to the riverbank, to – for the first time in the novel – move beyond the boundaries of how someone should be loved. For the lovers, there is simply “*Naaley*” : tomorrow. Though Chappu Thamburan (the Lord of Rubbish and spider who conceals himself) outlives Velutha, there is a deep, moving, and profound sadness in the estranged idiom of the lovers: a verbal and physical dance that suggests both the tragedy’s rootedness in its era and the imprint of its commerce with futurity.