‘THE SMALL VOICE OF HISTORY’ IN ARUNDHATI ROY’S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS
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This essay argues that Ranajit Guha’s ‘The small voice of history’ and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things are defined by, and help define, the contemporary ‘historical-political conjuncture’ that locates the motors of social, disciplinary, and epistemological transformation in the inherently or potentially resistant properties of the oppressed subaltern subject. A comparative reading of two generically different cultural artifacts – a theoretical-critical essay and a novel – that addresses both overlaps and differences between them, this essay also addresses the larger body of cultural work through which this conjuncture is also constituted, particularly work which engages with the difficulties that accrue to the task of recuperating the consciousness/voice of the oppressed and their subjugated histories.

In one of the more critically substantive readings of Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things (hereafter Small Things), Ahmad, who speaks to the
novel’s ‘curious mixture of matchless achievement and quite drastic failings’, posits an integral link between its preoccupations and Roy’s (ideological) location within a specific ‘social fraction’ that he says is composed of ‘radical sections of the cosmopolitan intelligentsia, in India and abroad’ (1997: 103). As he moves unproblematically between what he characterizes as the preoccupations of this ‘social fraction’, generally, and Roy’s, more specifically, as ‘a sign of the times’, he isolates, in particular, ‘the anti-communism of the novel’s political ideology’, which, for him, is commensurate with the anti-communism of the ‘cosmopolitan intelligentsia’, as is ‘her preoccupation with the tie between caste and sexuality . . . her portrayal of the erotic as the real zone of rebellion and Truth . . . her sense that the personal is the only arena of the political and therefore her sense of the inevitability of nullity and death’ (ibid.: 107). Indeed, for Ahmad, all these render her a ‘representative intellectual of this particular moment in India’ such that ‘her fiction gives us much insight into her world – the world she depicts in the novel and the world she inhabits as a writer’ (ibid.: 107).

Like Ahmad, I also believe that Small Things is embedded in, and draws upon, larger intellectual – theoretical, cultural, political – currents that have acquired prominence in the contemporary historical moment, ‘in India and abroad’. In this essay, I would like to explore one such set of currents – those addressed in the projects of subaltern studies scholars in general, and Ranajit Guha’s in particular. Specifically, as my title indicates, I want to focus on the ways in which Small Things articulates with Guha’s ‘The small voice of history’ (hereafter ‘Small voice’), which as the ‘text of a lecture delivered in Hyderabad on 11 January 1993’ (published thereafter in Subaltern Studies 9[1994]: 3) is roughly contemporaneous with Roy’s novel (published in 1997). Such a focus on particular ‘cultural artefact[s]’ produced within a specific ‘historical-political conjuncture’, as Niranjana puts it, enables us to see ‘how this . . . conjuncture is structured’ (2000: 140). A comparative reading, such as the one I undertake in this essay, of two generically different ‘cultural artefact[s]’ – one a theoretical-critical essay and the other a novel – enables us to track not only the overlaps, but also the differences between the two projects that draw upon and help define a conjuncture, which, in turn, enables us to see some of the complexities that characterize it.

The conjuncture that Roy’s novel and Guha’s essay exemplify and help illuminate locates the motors of social, disciplinary, and epistemological transformation in the inherently or potentially resistant properties of the oppressed subaltern subject – ‘small voice’ and ‘small things’. Furthermore, the larger body of cultural work through which this conjuncture is constituted approaches these subjects through whom social transformation is to be accomplished by, often simultaneously, taking on board a whole range of theoretical presuppositions, frequently mustered under the banner of postcolonial studies, that engage with the difficulties that accrue to the
essay, which needs to be explicitly acknowledged even if only to account for the differential spaces I allot to Roy’s novel as opposed to Guha’s essay and their respective projects. For, in part, this essay has grown out of my desire not only to understand and situate the deployment of what task of recuperating the consciousness/voice of the oppressed and their suppressed histories.

In this essay, then, I analyze, first, Guha and Roy’s deployment of ‘small’ – i.e. subordinated or subaltern subjects – as integral to their critique of dominant existing social and political arrangements and modes of writing or conceiving of history. Then, I examine their procedures for accessing and/or giving ‘voice’ to these subjects, otherwise construed as ‘hidden’ from history. I follow this examination with reflections on the differences between Guha and Roy’s procedures, some of which I view as arising from the genres/forms through which they seek to represent the ‘small voice’, ‘small things’. In the concluding section, I address what I see as the utopian element in their projects through which they seek to specify alternatives to that which they critique.

The deployment of ‘small’, and the whole range of ideological significations that resonate within it, in the titles, as the central emphases and, in Roy’s case, perspective of the two texts, represents one of the important continuities between Guha’s essay and Roy’s novel. The ‘small voice’ and ‘small things’ of the two texts are crucially those that dominant history, in particular what Guha in ‘Chandra’s death’ calls ‘the ordinary apparatus of historiography’, is constitutionally unable to record or actively suppresses. ‘Designed for big events and institutions’, says Guha, this apparatus is most at ease when made to operate on those larger phenomena that visibly stick out of the debris of the past. As a result, historical scholarship has developed, through recursive practice, a tradition that tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths. A critical historiography can make up for this lacuna by bending closer to the ground in order to pick up the traces of a subaltern life in its passage through time. (Guha 1997 [1987]: 36)

Thus, ‘Small voice’ enjoins us to ‘hear’ and ‘listen to’ ‘an undertone of harassment’ and ‘a note of pain’, which inflects the ‘voices’ of the women who participated fully and actively in the Telangana movement, but who, in the historical records of this movement, as Vasantha Kannabiran and K. Lalitha point out, were not so much written out as ‘seen as passive, secondary, supportive, inert, or glorified as heroines in revolt[,] [n]either of [which] perceptions has the capacity to encompass the curious contradictionary . . . of the women for whom the struggle was a lived experience’. For Kannabiran and Lalitha, ‘these [problematic] perceptions’ stem from ‘the inability to hear what women were saying’ (1989: 181, 199, emphasis in original). 4 Guha, quoting Heidegger, notes: ‘“Hearing”, we know “is constitutive of discourse”. To listen is already to be open to and existentially

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each text values in terms of the ‘small’ (marginalized/suppressed) ‘things’ and ‘voice’, but also to explain (to myself and others) the impact of a novel like Small Things. With respect to the latter, I seek to do this by making visible the mechanisms through which I believe Roy achieves her effects (on this see especially section 4 of this essay).

4 In ‘Small voice’, Guha cites Kannabiran and Lalitha’s essay as one that ‘challenge[s] the univocity of statist discourse’ (1994: 11). Indeed, Guha draws upon this essay’s representations of ‘women’s voice’ to make his case for the value of listening to ‘the small voice of history’.

4 In ‘Small voice’, Guha cites Kannabiran and Lalitha’s essay as one that ‘challenge[s] the univocity of statist discourse’ (1994: 11). Indeed, Guha draws upon this essay’s representations of ‘women’s voice’ to make his case for the value of listening to ‘the small voice of history’.
disposed towards: one inclines a little on one side in order to listen’ (1994: 9). In ‘Small voice’, the inability to ‘hear’ or ‘listen to’ what the subaltern says is represented as a structural condition of colonial, nationalist, and Marxist historiographies that, in their realized, or anticipated, aspiration to the power that accrues to the state, acquire their focus and coherence by suppressing or disregarding ‘the myriad voices in civil society’. Thus, ‘small voices are drowned in the noise of statist commands’ (1994: 7, 3).

Roy’s Small Things reproduces Guha’s alignment of dominant history with the ‘life of the state’ (Guha 1994: 3), and his specification of history as the means through which the state acquires its hegemonic hold. In its opposition of ‘Big’ vs. ‘Small’, Roy’s novel reproduces as well the opposition that structures Guha’s ‘elite’ vs. ‘subaltern’ histories, forms of consciousness and the terrain of their operation. Small Things presents history (most often, although inconsistently, with a capital H) as a dominating, oppressive force that saturates virtually all social and cultural space, including familial, intimate, and affective relationships. The novel’s sense of history as an overwhelming, impersonal force, whose imprint is most starkly visible through its effects – its obliteration of those who do not live in accordance with its values and dictates – receives its most sustained treatment in the chapter, ‘The history house’. Here, ‘History’ appears ‘in live performance’ (Roy 1997: 293), with the policemen, who were ‘only history’s henchmen’, as its instrumental players (ibid.: 292): ‘Machine guns in their minds. Responsibility for theTouchable Future on their thin but able shoulders….Sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke [History’s] laws’, these policemen ‘break’ and ‘smash’ Velutha (ibid.: 291–3), Ammu’s untouchable lover and her twins Estha and Rahel’s (potentially) surrogate father. In soaring, polemical prose, the novel asserts that these policemen were:

impelled by feelings that were primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear – civilization’s fear of nature, men’s fear of women, power’s fear of powerlessness… a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly….This was an era imprinting itself on those who lived it….If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connections between them and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago….They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (Roy 1997: 292–3)

So much is brought within history’s purview here, so many of the novel’s preoccupations – the oppressiveness of patriarchy, discrimination along caste lines – reappear in these passages as forms of history’s domination that
the spaces – public and private – that history commandeers to itself seem hermetically sealed off from any possibility of transformation, any emancipatory potential.

However, the epigraph to Small Things from John Berger (‘Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one’) and the novel’s privileging of the ‘small drama and fine detail of social existence’ lived ‘at its lower depths’ (Guha 1997 [1987]: 36) that constitute the life and times of Ammu, her twins, and Velutha disclose an alternative perspective: while history’s story is one of unrelenting oppressiveness and closure, focusing on ‘traces of subaltern life in its passage through time’ (Guha 1997 [1987]: 36) can counteract, operate in resistance to, such closure. Ismail, in his contribution to a recent Subaltern Studies volume dedicated to ‘community, gender and violence’, argues that ‘inherent’ in the ‘logic’ of dominant history’s ‘repression[s]’ – which manifest themselves ‘through a process of incorporation, subordination, and expulsion of social groups’ – ‘is the possibility of its own subversion’. For it is in ‘such expulsions, or epidermal locales that [dominant history] must produce in order to be, lies the possibility of other, more enabling or “operable” notions of community’ (2000: 216). It is for this reason, arguably, that Roy fixes her attention on the story of Ammu, her twins, Velutha and the love they have for each other. (Significantly, when Ammu and Velutha first set eyes on each other as adults, that moment is presented as one redolent with the possibility of change – a brief but sure falling away of history’s oppressive hold: ‘History was wrong-footed, caught off guard. Sloughed off like an old snakeskin. Its marks, its scars, its wounds from old wars and the walking-backwards days all fell away [Roy 1997: 167–8].)

The marginalization (and subsequent ‘expulsion’) of Ammu and her twins from their family and ancestral home is effected through a variety of circumstances, only some of which are of their making. As a ‘married daughter’; worse, as a divorced daughter; worse yet, as a divorced daughter from a love marriage; and, finally, most heinous of all, as a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage’, Ammu, according to her aunt, Baby Kochamma, ‘has no position in her parents’ home’ (ibid.: 45, emphasis in original). Neither do her twins: ‘doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, Half-Hindu Hybrids [with a penchant for reading and writing backwards] whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry’ (ibid.: 44), the twins also do not belong to the conventional family unit headed by Chacko, Ammu’s brother, Mammachi, her mother, and Baby Kochamma. The novel both displays this marginalization and asserts it. Thus, on the day Sophie Mol, Chacko’s half-English daughter arrives, the twins, Ammu, and Velutha are placed mostly on the peripheries of, sometimes even outside, the ‘play’ in which Sophie Mol is given the starring
role, while the other members of the family hover around her within the ‘play’ (ibid.: 164–73).

Unlike Ammu and her twins, Velutha is perceived as someone situated resolutely outside even minimal modalities of incorporation. As a Paravan, an untouchable, his ‘kinship’ with touchables (to which social group Ammu and her twins belong), any recognition that ‘if nothing else, at least biologically’ he was a fellow human being ‘had been severed long ago’. Thus:

as a young boy, Velutha would come with [his father] Vellaya Paapen to the back entrance . . . [Ammu’s father] Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything Touchables touched, [and] Mammachi could remember a time . . . when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint. (Roy 1997: 70)

What makes Velutha troublesome so far as the touchables and untouchables are concerned is his skill with machines, which translates to a form of labor without which Paradise Pickles and Preserves (the factory Chacko takes over from Mammachi, whom he relegates to ‘sleeping partner’) could not function: Velutha assembles and maintains the machines and builds the ‘cutting surfaces’ and ‘the ground level furnaces’ that make the task of preparing the preserves and pickles easier (ibid.: 72–3).

What makes Velutha dangerous so far as the touchables and untouchables are concerned is his refusal to be interpellated as a Paravan: his ‘lack of hesitation’, for example, and ‘an unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel.’ These attributes, ‘desirable in Touchables’, according to his father, an ‘Old World Paravan’, ‘could (and would, and indeed should) be construed as insolence’ in a Paravan (ibid.: 73).

Within the governing logic of Roy’s novel, it is precisely this out-of-placeness (for which the touchables and untouchables resent him and will betray him) that makes Velutha a likely agent of the possibility of social change, much as it is Ammu’s and her twins’ out-of-placeness within their family and societal set up that will make them the instruments for revealing the emancipatory potentialities of their location. For example, in highly romanticized, mystifying prose, Ammu is presented as someone who, on certain days, ‘live[s] in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of her [family’s] power’ (ibid.: 44). She defiantly and visibly breaks with her family and her caste/class-belonging when, after Sophie Mol’s funeral she goes to the police station to counter Baby Kochamma’s implication of Velutha in Sophie Mol’s ‘murder’, whereas
Baby Kochamma ‘had gambled on the fact that Ammu, whatever else she did, however angry she was, would never publicly admit to her relationship with Velutha’ (ibid.: 304).

With regard to the circumstances that underpin Ammu’s and Velutha’s refusal to be interpellated, Roy is working with what has become the virtual common sense of much contemporary liberal and progressive dissident thought. Speaking of the ‘failure of interpellation’ as consonant with the possibility of change, Ismail notes how ‘[d]isidentification’ with one’s given social location ‘must be read as a crucial first step in the production of a new and alternative identity’ (2000: 226).

For Guha, doing subaltern history entails attending to, and recuperating, the ‘autonomous domain’ of subaltern politics. Concomitantly, it entails the recovery of an ‘autonomous [subaltern] consciousness’, rendered visible in the subaltern’s resistance and audible in the ‘small voice[s] of history’. How this recuperation is to be accomplished is one of the central predicaments of this mode of historiography, especially since this ‘consciousness/voice’ and its ‘domain’ is inaccessible and can only be ‘deduce[d]’, as Spivak puts it, from the texts of the elite’ (2000: 331).

3 Inaccessibility should be construed not only literally, but also as a form of knowledge and representation that is not accessible within and to dominant thought: ‘It is not that non-official sources are not abundant or not easily accessible’, says Das, ‘but rather that the legitimacy of those who are producing these materials needs to be recognized by official history’ (1989: 324). On this, see also Chakrabarty’s discussion of ‘subaltern pasts’ (1998: 475ff.) and Beverley (1999), especially his introduction.

Here Spivak is referencing what Guha himself has specified in the ‘Epilogue’ to his Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, a work Guha views as integrally connected to the collective project designated now as Subaltern Studies’ (1983b: vii):

The historical phenomenon of [peasant] insurgency meets the eye for the first time as an image framed in prose, hence the outlook of counter-insurgency – an image caught in a distorting mirror. However, the distortion has a logic to it. That is the logic of opposition... A rural uprising thus turns into a site for two rival cognitions to meet and to define each other negatively.

It is precisely this contradiction which we have used in these pages as a key to our understanding of peasant rebellion as a representation of the will of its subject. For that will has been known to us only in its mirror image. Inscribed in elite discourse it had to be read as writing in reverse. (Guha 1983b: 333)

The extremely fraught relationship between Guha’s insistence on recovering an ‘autonomous domain’ and ‘consciousness’ of the subaltern and his acknowledgment in the passages quoted above of the mutual imbrication of the subaltern and elite domains leads him to a related, for some even more debilitating, predicament – an acute awareness of the historian’s mediation in this recovery. The double-bind in which Guha is caught here is one that defines what Rao, drawing on Spivak, describes as ‘struggles over
representation — in its doubled sense that invokes both a set of political claims (from within parliamentary democracy) and the [impossible] task of “authentic” reproduction of presence (2001: 1).

‘Small voice’ seems to register little of the strain evident in a passage like the one above. Instead, the essay fairly straightforwardly critiques elite (dominant) historiography, even of the Marxist variety – P. Sunderayya’s *Telangana People’s Struggle and Its Lessons* in this instance — as one that is not only statist, but also patriarchal in its guiding assumptions, to define his plea for an alternative, ‘critical historiography’ of the Telangana movement. This alternative historiography would ‘regard “what women were saying” as integral to [it]’ (1994: 11). In the concluding pages, Guha outlines some of the ways in which such a project would re-write (write out, more accurately) dominant historiography’s ‘apparatus’ both conceptually and formally: it will, for instance, ‘destroy the hierarchization that privileges one set of contradictions as [the] principal [one]’ to be resolved, center women as agents, and ‘interrupt’ the linearity, order and, thus, the authority that inhere in the narrative structure of elite historiography.

I want to focus on one proposition, which I have not mentioned thus far, in Guha’s outline of what such an alternative historiography will accomplish. I wish to do so for two reasons: 1) it brings together several of his claims regarding this new historiography, as well as allowing us to discern some of the difficulties that inhere in his conceptualization of it; 2) it is elaborated as one of the central narrative strands in *Small Things*, but with some significant procedural differences that seem to elicit Roy’s reader’s assent to her presentation of it more readily.

‘I feel’, says Guha, ‘that women’s voice, once it is heard, will activate and make audible the other small voices as well’ (1994: 11). (Although Guha mentions ‘adivasis — the aboriginal population of this region’ as an instance of ‘other small voices’, we could, arguably, include dalits, the self-appointed name by which the untouchables wish to be called, among ‘other small voices’ as well.) The assumption that underpins Guha’s assertion of the continuities between ‘women’s voice’ and ‘other small voices’ is that they ‘might [all] share’, as Rao observes in a somewhat different context, ‘a common fate and history as far as the question of access to political power (and recognition) might be concerned’ (2001: 1). Pursuing a similar continuity, Burwell argues that:

>feminist] critics have translated an association between the postmodern breakdown of boundaries and women’s alleged failure to constitute subjective boundaries [by virtue of what Hélène Cixous, in ‘Le Rire de la Meduse’ defines as their uneasy existence within the ‘Symbolic Order’ defined by patriarchy] into a claim that women have a privileged relation to the project of creating alternative

8 Rao (2001) notes: ‘The term untouchable was first used . . . [by] the Maharaja of Baroda . . . in addressing the Depressed Classes Mission Society in Bombay on October 18, 1909. Depressed Classes was the official term until the current terminology of Scheduled Castes came into effect with the Government of India Act of 1935 . . . As early as 1931 . . . Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan had suggested the term “non caste” or “non conformist Hindus” since Depressed Classes was an insulting term. From about 1935 or so Gandhi called untouchables Harijans (children of god) . . . [which] is a term abhorred by almost all untouchables, being seen as a term of paternalism and condescension . . . The term dalit is the preferred [one] today . . . It means “ground down, broken to pieces” and was adopted by untouchables in an attempt to subvert the stigma associated with untouchability, referring instead to a long history of oppression and violence that had given them a militant and separate identity.’
conceptions of selfhood that do not rely on the creation of boundaries and therefore on the subjection of others. (Burwell 1997: 31)

Guha’s claim that ‘women’s voice’ can ‘activate’ the voices of other subalterns seems to be of a piece with this ‘translation’. Nevertheless, a fairly powerful strand within (western) feminism that has annexed to its own self-definition ‘other small voices’ – of the raced and classed subjects, for instance – should make us wary about doing so. This strand within feminism has done so: 1) by erasing the latter’s specificity in order to render the gendered subject/the subject of gender hierarchically significant; 2) by presuming an openness and egalitarianism for itself that enables a (continuing) blindness to, or deliberate disregard of, its own implication in racism and classism.

In the Indian context, the project of allowing ‘women’s voice to ... activate and make audible other small voices’ is fraught with similar problems. In an essay, ‘Problems for a contemporary theory of gender’, published in the same year (1994) as Guha’s, Tharu and Niranjana, address ‘the new visibility of women in [a] variety of domains and across the political spectrum’ – where ‘“women” seems to stand in for the subject (agent, addressee, field of inquiry) of feminism itself’ – to raise the issue of its ‘problematic’ status. For as ‘the possibilities of alliance with other subaltern forces (dalits, for example) that are opening up in civil society are often blocked ... feminists find themselves drawn into disturbing configurations within dominant culture’ (1994: 93). Pointing to the ‘differential subjugation [of women] in relation to class, caste and community’ (ibid.: 104–105) – differences that are occluded in ‘the hidden structuring of this feminist subject’ (ibid.: 96) – Tharu and Niranjana, through their analysis of what they label as the ‘metonym ... Mandal-Chunduru’,9 alert us to an impasse that Indian feminism faces with regard to its presumed articulation with caste and class. ‘In the consolidation of the middle class and in the othering of caste’, they argue, ‘“women” play a crucial role’. This is illustrated in ‘Mandal-Chunduru’ where ‘[t]he category of woman, and therefore in a very important sense the field of feminism as well as the female subject, emerge[d] by obscuring the dalit woman and marking the lower caste as the predatory male who is the legitimate target of feminist rage’ (ibid.: 99, 101).

The point I wish to make through this somewhat lengthy excursus is as follows: far from assuming, as Guha does, a natural continuity between women’s and other class- and caste-marked ‘small voices’, that continuity in fact needs to be established, and that requires work – political work. Thus, in a related essay, John writes: ‘For feminism to move ahead and take on the challenges of the present, it must re-evaluate, that is to say, signify anew the politics of class, caste and religion.’ Furthermore, ‘[r]esignifying categories of caste and community affiliation by making them amenable to contestation is
also necessary in order that the patriarchies of dominated groups – that is, dominated, fractured patriarchies – can be challenged’ (1996: 27).

In locating the ‘small voices’ of the novel in Ammu, her twins, and Velutha, thereby making them (potentially) bearers of an alternative knowledge, way of being in the world, and form of community, Roy is involved in a project similar to Guha’s. However, because she situates her critique of patriarchy within that of gender and caste in their dialectical relationship with each other, she can also be distinguished from Guha. The critique of patriarchy, gender, and caste that emerges, on the one hand, from Ammu’s, the twins, and Velutha’s individualized responses to their social-cultural circumstances, and, on the other, from the (loving) relationship between them does not subsume the one (for instance, caste) under the other (gender), or vice versa, nor does it assume that suffering one form of oppression by definition makes a person cognizant of other forms of oppression.

For example, women’s responses to patriarchal oppression are not homogeneous. In Ammu, Pappachi’s ‘cold, calculating cruelty’ (Roy 1997: 172) provokes an acute consciousness of injustice and rebellion (‘She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued, that she sought them out, even enjoyed them’ [ibid.: 172–3]). Her ‘lofty sense of injustice’ against patriarchal domination and the rebelliousness that flows from it does indeed feed her desire to escape from her claustrophobic family situation, and defines her out-of-placeness, all of which in turn fuel her ‘transgressive’ love for Velutha. But all this does not altogether exempt her from the contradictions that flow from her simultaneous investment in some class-marked values – her investment, for example, in cleanliness and obedience, for which Chacko will label her a ‘fascist’ (ibid.: 142), and her insistence, when the twins ‘blow spit bubbles’, that ‘only clerks behaved like that, not aristocrats’ (ibid.: 80).

Unlike Ammu, Pappachi’s ‘cold, calculating cruelty’ makes Mammachi even more long suffering and submissive, an attitude she reinforces when she ‘commit[s] herself to Chacko’s care’, and, later, when she hands over her ‘small but profitable [factory]’ to him. There is a reciprocal relationship between her submissiveness and her willing embrace of patriarchal arrangements so that, while Chacko’s ‘libertine relationships with the factory women’ are condoned as ‘Men’s Needs’ (ibid.: 160), Ammu’s with Velutha provokes an ‘unmanageable fury’: ‘She thought of her [daughter] naked, coupling with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie … His particular Paravan Smell. Like animals … like a dog with a bitch on heat … [Ammu] had defiled generations of breeding’ (ibid.: 244; emphasis in original). Here, Mammachi’s embrace of patriarchal values, which includes their investment in a heteronormative family structure and caste-defined identity that controls women’s
sexuality, not least because women are viewed as reproducers of a ‘pure’ bloodline within the family, are all part of the same package.

But, if with Ammu and Mammachi it seems as if the rebellion against or endorsement of patriarchal oppression fuels a concomitant refusal or endorsement of caste-based hatred of untouchability, with Velutha, it is his refusal to be interpellated as a Paravan that seems to enable his subversion of patriarchy’s definitions of a hetero-normative masculinity and sexuality. When the policemen hunt him down in ‘The History House’, ‘[t]hey noticed his painted nails’. At which point, ‘one of them held them up and waved the fingers coquettishly at the others. They laughed. “What’s this?” in a high falsetto, “AC-DC?”’ (ibid.: 294).

Velutha’s father, unlike his son but like Mammachi, willingly accepts, even colludes in, his own oppression. He ‘offer[s] to kill his son with his own bare hands’ when he informs Mammachi of his son’s relationship with her daughter (ibid.: 75).

In Small Things, then, Roy does not present subordination as a stable, unproblematic condition from which resistance, necessarily, proceeds. Instead, in mapping varying degrees of rebellion and defiance against, and collusion with the dominant, she seems to be on the side of those critics of subaltern studies, who complain that because ‘subaltern mentalité’ is recuperated as ‘the mentalité of the subaltern at the time of opposition, at the moment of their action against domination’ (Masselos 2001: 192), the ‘dialectics of collaboration and acquiescence on the part of the subalterns and the wide range of attitudes between resignation and revolt have been underplayed’ in this mode of historiography (Das Gupta 2001: 110).

Underwriting the differences between ‘Small voice’ and Small Things are differences that flow from: 1) the form or genre in which their arguments are cast; and, more significantly, 2) what each work seeks to accomplish. These, in turn, inform the disposition of their arguments and the rhetorical resources they draw upon to make their arguments. A critical-theoretical essay, Guha’s ‘Small voice’ deconstructs ‘elite’, ‘statist’ historiography so as to make a pitch for an alternative, more progressive one that takes the subaltern as its subject. For such a historiography, ‘women’s voice’, as a voice that has not been (perhaps cannot be heard) by or through dominant interests, provides the way in. For, in an essay that takes to task statist historiography for erasing subaltern presence, Guha demonstrates how even an otherwise revolutionary (Marxist) account documenting peasant resistance to state power and landlord dominance itself elides another subaltern – women’s – voice. By so doing this account reproduces the procedures of
statist historiography and not only because the communist Telangana People’s Struggles aspired to state power, but also because the struggles’ guiding assumptions were resolutely patriarchal. Thus, for Guha the ‘voice’ left out – women’s – comes to define the subaltern voice that should be retrieved, especially for the access it can provide to other subaltern voices. In as much as Guha is invested in making an explicit and unequivocal argument for an alternative historiography located in the category ‘women’, he is not inclined to take on board the uneven emergence and development of a subaltern consciousness or subjectivity and the heterogeneous conditions that enable or disable this emergence and development. This is why, I suspect, the problematic aspects of women’s differential negotiations of caste that, for instance, Tharu and Niranjana address, in an essay written at the same time as Guha’s, do not have much purchase in his argument.

To make his case for the ‘small voice of history’, furthermore, Guha draws upon Kannabiran and Lalitha’s efforts at reading ‘an undertone of harassment’, a ‘note of pain’ in ‘women’s voice’ in the interviews they conducted as part of a group project with the women who participated in the Telangana People’s Struggles to compile these women’s histories. Thus, Guha seems considerably distanced from the ‘voice[s]’ he enjoins us to ‘hear’, ‘listen to’. As such, despite the lack of any explicit acknowledgment of this mediation (and distance) on Guha’s part, his readers cannot help but be aware of his own mediating presence as he appropriates someone else’s representation of ‘women’s voice’ to specify an alternative form of historiography.

Roy, like Guha, is interested in the difference (and alternative possibilities) of ‘Small’ versus ‘Big’ voices. But, unlike Guha, she is interested as well not only in the conditions of the former’s emergence and development, but also in how these conditions do not uniformly yield the difference of the subaltern from the dominant. To give flesh, as it were, to her interests, she draws upon the resources of story telling (which entail the use of both imagination and invention), in general, and the techniques of the realist novel, in particular, to bring her readers into a close, even intimate relationship with the world her characters inhabit and the lives they attempt to live therein. In ‘The burden of English’, Spivak argues that literature performs its ideological work ‘in an almost clandestine way’ (1992: 278). To demonstrate her claim, Spivak focuses in particular on the realist novel, which seeks to secure the reader’s ‘assent’ to its world-view through identification (ibid.: 276). At stake as well in the ‘realism’ of the realist novel are criteria of plausibility that enable the reader’s seamless entry into, and identification with, the fictional world depicted. Roy does this, and thereby attempts to gain assent to the ideological work of her novel, through the deployment of a specific perspective – Rahel’s – which she crafts by sketching in Rahel’s psychic location such that certain individual(ized) values and ways of perceiving the world can be shown to flow realistically from such a location. Simulta-
neously, Roy addresses and resolves some of the dilemmas that inhere in any attempt to recover ‘small voice[s]’ for one’s own ideological agendas through her deployment of this perspective, and through, one might add, the strategies for producing (the effect of) realism.

A number of the novel’s reviews have noted its ‘quirky, funny, child’s view of the world’ (French 1998: 7), without speculating, however, why Roy proceeds this way. I think we can be quite specific about the view of the world Small Things offers. For the perspective in this novel is, primarily, that of Rahel’s as a child

11 Roy, in fact, deploys more than one perspective, although her use of Rahel’s perspective is the most sustained. There are sections in the novel when Ammu’s or Velutha’s or even at times Baby Kochamma’s perspective is brought to the fore. There are also times, in the polemical passages, for example, where the writer herself seems to step in. She handles these perspectives not by using first person, but by using a third-person voice that is close to, indeed seems to inhabit the consciousness of the person whose perspective ostensibly frames a given segment of the text.

12 The opening chapter displays this complex deployment of Rahel’s perspective particularly well. A page into the opening, the novel records: ‘It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem . . . . The wild garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives . . . . Now years later, Rahel has a memory . . . . She remembers.’ Almost imperceptibly, this mutates into the

Guha’s essay and Roy’s novel represent different procedures for ‘hear[ing]’ and ‘listen[ing]’ to subaltern voices, which, in turn, call for different operations on the part of the reader if s/he is to proceed critically and self-consciously. Precisely that which, on the face of it, seems relatively easy to
discern in Guha’s essay – the historian’s distance from the subaltern voice and consciousness he seeks to recover – appears virtually impossible to discern in Roy’s novel, given, as I have indicated above, how hard Roy works at erasing or suspending the reader’s awareness of such mediations by constructing a perspective that can plausibly have unmediated access to the ‘small voice[s]’ she represents. Thus, where Guha’s essay enacts and makes available the distance that is often viewed as the pre-condition for critical thinking, Roy’s novel requires working against the grain of, or at least making visible, the conceit – generated by its ‘realism’ – that Rahel has (can have) unmediated access to the ‘small voice[s]’ she presents; this requires being aware of Roy as the writer who crafts the perspective to achieve this effect. For a number of Roy’s readers, including myself, such a recognition does not denude her fiction (or its central conceit) of its powers of seduction; but it does provide a way for the reader to gain some critical purchase on the sources of that seduction.

At stake in ‘Small voice’ and Small Things is an argument for transformation – of the conventional apparatus of historiography (Guha) and of the stultifying, discriminatory effects of social and political arrangements authorized by patriarchal ideology (Roy). The two, of course, are not unrelated undertakings. For an argument to transform inherited paradigms of historiography that locates itself, as Guha’s ‘Small voice’ does, in an attempt to retrieve the agency of the insurgent subaltern assumes a transformation of existing social and political conditions as both cause and product of this ‘new’ or alternative historiography. Concomitantly, in as much as Small Things mobilizes ‘History’ explicitly as the trope through which the existing repressive social and political arrangements are figured forth, re-envisioning and re-writing history is part and parcel of transforming these repressive conditions, and is, arguably, what the novel’s retrieval of ‘small things’ enacts.

Thus far in my essay, I have focused on Guha’s and Roy’s critique of existing material and discursive conditions, as well as the ideology that underwrites them, which they seek to transform, and on the subjects/subject positions that enable this critique in the first place. But their critique, as I have already indicated, is based on their perception of an alternative – a (radically) different politics, a differently structured society. In this concluding section, I would like to focus on their elaboration and/or specification of this alternative, defined via what I view as a utopian space and time or impulse that underwrites their critique of existing conditions. This utopian space and time or impulse is important to track not only because it gives us
desire to enact them were political, they were connected to modern understandings of democratic public life’ (1998: 475).

14 Jameson makes an identical claim when he argues that the ‘two seemingly antithetical drives (and literary discourses)’ of satire (read: social critique) and utopia ‘in reality replicate each other such that each is always secretly active within the other’s sphere of influence. All satire … necessarily carries a utopian frame of reference within itself; all utopias … are driven secretly by the satirist’s rage at fallen reality’ (1986: 80).


16 This curious transposition of real life as something staged, with the utopian moment located off stage, presumably in the space otherwise of real life, has a disorienting effect that I think is intended.

access to the ways in which they conceive of the motors of social and political transformation, but also because it allows us to: 1) in the case of Roy, reconsider an aspect of her novel that critics have found troublesome – i.e. her situating of the ‘taboo-busting’ (Kanchan Limaye’s [2000] phrase) inter-caste romantic and sexual relationship of Ammu and Velutha on the terrain of what Ahmad dismissively labels a ‘phallocentric utopia’ that evades or escapes ‘the actually constituted field of politics’ (1997: 104); 2) in the case of Guha, reconsider what are often viewed as contradictions in his work as potentially a mis-recognition of some elements of his project.

Burwell notes that ‘discourses of social transformation – whether or not they construct an image of a transformed social space – retain a relation to the utopian impulse’ (1997: xiii). Viewing the relationship between utopia and social critique as a symbiotic one, Burwell adds: ‘utopia implicitly critiques existing social conditions by explicitly thematizing a set of wishes and hopes for an alternative society; critique implicitly draws upon the utopian impulse to establish the “outside” of existing social conditions upon which our notion of critical distance rests’ (ibid.: 3).14 In this view, then, utopia (or the utopian impulse) far from being radically separated or hermetically sealed off from the contradictions and shortcomings of existing social and political determinants, by being a response to these contradictions and shortcomings, must, of necessity, reference them, be cognizant of their impingements on itself. Thus Jameson notes that ‘the [utopian] text requires this network of topicality within itself to stand as the Real which it will then undertake to neutralize’ (1977: 8). Discussions of utopia and utopian discourses also note that the transformed social and political space utopias and utopian discourses gesture toward or elaborate always exist in an undefined future, and are often not only about a future that cannot yet be represented, but also might well be a vision of an (impossible) possibility.15

There are two moments in Roy’s novel – one fairly brief and the other somewhat more developed – where she frames (in) a utopian space and time seemingly sequestered from real life, only to reassert real life’s intrusion into this utopian space and time almost immediately in the one instance and its simultaneous presence in the other as it presses on the borders of the utopian space and time. In these moments, in compressed but richly allusive ways, she sketches the lineaments of an ideal(ized), desired form of sexuality and community, via reconfigured familial relationships that exist in sharp contrast to the ‘smug, ordered world’ Ammu so ‘rage[s] against’, and against which world she ‘hope[s]’ Velutha ‘house[s]’ a corresponding ‘living, breathing anger’ (Roy 1997: 167). I have already had occasion to refer to the first moment as the space and time when and where the ‘marks’, ‘scars’, and ‘wounds’ of history fall away as Ammu and Velutha first set sight on each other as adults ‘off stage’, while real life is going on ‘[on] stage’, within a ‘play’.16 However, real life, in the guise of ‘History’s fiends’, almost
immediately ‘returned to claim them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived . . . Ammu walked up to the verandah, back into the play’ (ibid.: 168).

The second comprises the focus of the entire concluding chapter, significantly entitled ‘The cost of living’, whose last word is ‘Tomorrow’. Chronologically, the events this chapter represents and/or alludes to – the thirteen nights of love Ammu and Velutha share – in the narrative’s ‘real’ time precede Sophie Mol’s death by drowning, Velutha’s brutal murder, Estha’s ‘return’ to his father, Ammu’s literal expulsion from her home and subsequent death so that in the real world she exists only as a ‘Receipt No. Q49673’, with ‘the whole of her crammed into a clay pot’ (ibid.: 155). They precede, in other words, all those devastating sorrows and oppressions that constrain the real life of its protagonists. Thus, even as the thirteen nights Velutha and Ammu share seem sealed off from real life, real life in fact powerfully impinges on them, not only because it presses upon the borders that ostensibly seal it off, but also because it is referenced within the utopian space as ‘the abyss’ that lies ‘beyond’ (ibid.: 319), ‘The Big Things [that] lurked inside’, and an awareness of ‘the cost’ this moment will extract: ‘The cost of living climbed to unaffordable heights . . . Two lives. Two children’s childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders’ (ibid.: 318).

Critics of Small Things have tended to hone in on the erotic and sexual dimension of Ammu’s and Velutha’s transgressive inter-caste relationship as the site of their individualized rebellion, and as the site, therefore, of Roy’s politics.17 Without ignoring or diminishing the significance of this dimension, I want to (re)locate the novel and Roy’s politics in a different register, within which it acquires a larger social and political significance.

The utopian moments I have alluded to above undoubtedly derive a lot of their force from the sexual and erotic charge that Ammu and Velutha’s (very brief) romantic relationship generates. And although, as I have indicated, real life in the form of all those aspects of their social location that constrain them is not excised from these moments, the romance genre within which these moments are cast – in particular through their intense investment in sexual desire and its fulfillment – also defines them as utopian – as moments, in other words, that take place relatively ‘outside’ the strictures that govern existing social and sexual relations. Thus, at the end of the novel, though the readers know Velutha and Ammu are dead, within the utopian space that constitutes the concluding chapter they are alive and represent the ‘hope’ for a future exempt from gender- and caste-based oppression.

Ahmad finds this ‘intermeshing of caste and sexuality’ entirely ‘conventional (1997: 104). To an extent he is right. For there exists what Glenn calls a ‘female genre’ where romantic love and sexuality are deployed precisely as the terrain on which profoundly embedded differences (of race, in Glenn’s examples; of caste and class in Small Things) are resolved and overcome.18

18 Glenn, in his comparative analysis of Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee’s fiction, finds in Gordimer’s novels a ‘persistent formal and thematic’ engagement with ‘their adaptation of a typically (though not exclusively) female genre in which the [white] woman’s sexual and/or romantic commitment [to a black man] is central, symbolic and decisive’. For Glenn this represents ‘in some sense the offering of oneself . . . as a peculiarly female response . . . that . . . increasingly takes a form of commitment to a symbolic mode of marriage with Africa’ (1994: 22–23, emphasis in original).
However, we can also view Ammu and Velutha’s transgressive relationship as part of a discourse less about overcoming and more about annihilating caste distinction. For example, Rao alludes to the following remarks made by Ambedkar ‘in his heyday of dalit mobilization’:

There are many castes which allow inter-dining. But it is common experience that inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of caste . . . I am convinced that the real remedy is inter-marriage. *Fusion of blood alone can create the feeling of being kith and kin* [emphasis added] . . . *Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste* [emphasis in original]. (Rao 2001: 6)

Given the centrality of Ambedkar’s arguments to projects like Roy’s that critique the profound inequities based on caste consciousness, it is hardly surprising to find traces of his argument in Roy’s novel. His remedy – ‘*Fusion of blood alone . . . will serve as the solvent of class*’ – can also be said to reappear in Roy’s novel in its investment in Ammu and Velutha’s romantic and sexual relationship, which is virulently objected to precisely because of the threat it is seen to pose to ‘the maintenance of caste purity’, which, in turn, is linked, as Rao notes, to the ‘control of women’s sexuality’ (2001: 6). Mammachi’s ‘unmanageable fury’ over Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, for example, is provoked by her awareness that Ammu had thereby ‘defiled generations of breeding’. With a recognition of how Ambedkar’s remarks might operate as a sub-text for Roy’s portrayal of the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, we are able to see it as exemplifying more than their individualized bid for freedom and fulfillment of their desires; instead, we can plausibly situate it in a (larger) project that seeks to transform the ideological grounds of a hetero-normative family structure.

In this regard, we should note that these utopian moments also include within their purview Ammu’s twins, who are represented as the mediating figures – participants in and enablers of Ammu and Velutha’s love for each other. (Estha and Rahel love ‘by day’ the man – Velutha – their mother loves ‘by night’ [Roy 1997: 193], and in the concluding chapter they are represented as ‘the twin midwives of Ammu’s dreams’, who ‘willed’ Velutha and Ammu’s nights of love ‘to happen’, even ‘prepared the ground for it’ when they ‘l[eft] behind a boat shaped patch of bare earth, cleared and ready for love’ [ibid.: 318].)

*Small Things*, then, situates Ammu and Velutha’s relationship within a nexus of another set of relationships, which could (in a not yet possible future) come to constitute an alternative, more enabling family and form of community. It is significant that in re-envisioning the family (and form of community), which derives precisely from all that is wrong and oppressive in Ammu and Velutha’s families, it is the roles of the father and husband/partner, *Small Things* suggests, that need to be recast. Against Pappachi’s
‘cold, calculating cruelty’, we are invited to see Velutha as the twins’ ‘adored friend and mentor’ (Kalpana Wilson’s description), who helps them repair the boat they travel in to the ‘History House’, who, when visited by Estha, Rahel, and Sophie Mol, dressed in saris as Mrs Pillai, Mrs Eapen, and Mrs Rajagopalan, ‘entertain[s]’ them ‘treating them like real ladies. Instinctively colluding in the conspiracy of their fiction, taking care not to decimate it with adult carelessness.’ As an adult, ‘[y]ears later’, Rahel ‘recognize[s] the sweetness of that gesture’ (Roy 1997: 181). Similarly, in pointed contrast to Pappachi’s violence against Mammachi, Chacko’s thoughtless exploitation of the women factory workers, and Ammu’s husband’s unprincipled behavior when he accedes to his English boss’s desire to sexually exploit Ammu, Velutha’s relationship with Ammu is portrayed as a reciprocal one (‘he was not necessarily the only giver of gifts ... she had gifts to give too’ [ibid: 168]); and the sexual encounter described in the closing pages is represented as ‘markedly non-phallocentric’.19

Thus, if, as Knight notes, ‘the recasting of sexual morality, the liberation of sexuality from present-day social conventions and constraints is a major preoccupation of many utopian writers’ (1997: 15), Roy’s utopian moments both share this preoccupation and extend it by aligning it with a project that attempts to recast a stronghold of patriarchal authority – the family and the relations sanctioned therein through which women (and children’s) subordination is secured.

Of course, this reconfiguration or recasting of existing social and political relationships, only briefly glimpsed in the two moments I have discussed above, is presented as utopian in part precisely because it happens in a thus far unavailable future – ‘Tomorrow’, for example is the word that closes the novel and the second utopian moment.20 For the social transformation these moments embody requires a change – radical change – in the structural conditions that constitute existing society, whose opposition to such change is revealed as deeply embedded, not least because such transformation could rout the prevailing relationships of power and subordination. Thus, the policemen, ‘history’s henchmen’, as they ‘break’ and ‘smash’ Velutha are represented as ‘merely inoculating a community against an outbreak’ (Roy 1997: 293).

In a phrase that uncannily recalls the second utopian moment in Small Things – the thirteen nights of love Ammu and Velutha share – Das, who endorses ‘the centrality of the historical moment of rebellion in understanding subalterns as subjects of their own history’ ((1989: 312), notes:

It is possible that in the face of the massive institutional structures of bureaucratic domination, subaltern rebellions can only provide a night-time of love…; it cannot [as yet?] be transformed into a life-time of love. Yet perhaps in capturing

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19 Wilson’s (n.d.) ‘rejoinder’ to Ahmad notes how he ‘appears to have used “phallic” as synonym for “erotic” in his critique – in reality not only the approach to sexuality of the book as a whole, but the actual sexual encounter between the lovers described at the end of the book is markedly non-phallocentric’.

20 For a quite different assessment, consider Nair: ‘In tragedy, there is no tomorrow; in a fairy tale, tomorrow always hovers around the corner. Roy’s novel closes with “tomorrow” opting in the end for the charm of the fairy tale rather than the gravity of tragedy’ (1997: 6).
Such an understanding of subaltern rebellions – as the site within, and through, which subaltern agency and subjectivity is rendered visible – precariously and contingently defined (‘Yet, perhaps . . .’) and momentarily achieved resonates with the vocabulary (and categories) through which the utopian moments in *Small Things* are figured. What is more, their definition is accompanied, as in *Small Things*, by an acute awareness of that which constitutes their limits – the absence of comprehensive social and political transformation required before they can become a ‘life-time of love’. This understanding names, in other words, that (impossible) possibility, which nonetheless indexes a modality of desire many theorists consider ‘a fundamental dimension of utopia’ (Knight 1997: 9).

Drawing on Das, Henry Schwarz is among a handful of scholars who, in writing about the subaltern studies project, explicitly recognizes the utopian impulse in this work. Noting how this ‘project seemed theoretically idealist from the start’ (2001: 316), he adds that ‘[t]he rhetorical force of recovering “people’s history” in the context of decolonization is persuasive. Even if subaltern consciousness theorized here is finally irrecoverable in fact, it remains a crucial utopian aspiration for a fully decolonized historiography’ (ibid.: 319). Schwarz emphasizes the effects that will flow from this aspiration, specifically with respect to the writing of history. Thus, ‘history may not necessarily find something new, but it will do something new: it will rewrite the past from a perspective never before considered and in the process revolutionize that story’ (ibid.: 323).

The subaltern, for Schwarz, is not much more than a ‘technique’ for an ‘alternative form of discourse’, and the project’s presumption of access to a subaltern presence and voice merely a ‘subject effect’ of that discourse. I believe, however, that the ‘crucial utopian aspiration’ of the subaltern studies project, especially as it is elaborated in Guha’s work, can be (re)located in precisely that which makes Schwarz so uneasy as to elicit his careful qualifications and reservations. Guha’s ‘utopian aspiration’, in other words, is not only to ‘achieve’ what Schwarz characterizes as ‘the impossible ideal of allowing an unmediated subaltern voice to speak’ through and in the ‘textual space’ (O’Hanlon’s words) his work wishes to make available; his ‘utopian aspiration’ is also, as O’Hanlon observes also with considerable unease, to see this (wished for) work as ‘coterminous with the struggles of the dispossessed, feeding directly into them by making sense of them’ (O’Hanlon 2001 [1988]: 174). With regard to the former, Guha wishes to erase the mediations between the subaltern’s voice and presence and the historian who reconstructs these, even though cutting across this wish and pressing upon it (much as actually existing social and political arrangements do on the
a low caste woman – as a ‘textual site for struggle to reclaim for history an experience buried in the forgotten crevice of our past’ (1997 [1987]: 40). Noting how ‘the abstract legality’ of the document ‘insists on naming this many-sided tissue of human predicament as a case’ (ibid.: 38), he goes on to reconstruct a nuanced account, which displays, as Sivaramakrishnan puts it, ‘a keen awareness of [patriarchal] domination within kinship networks ostensibly benign and functional, as well as a documentation of a mode of [female] resistance that is effective precisely because it was carried out in the external form of compliance’ (2001: 222). Sarkar is right when he suggests that ‘Chandra’s death’ is ‘anti-positivist in its awareness of the constructed nature of all evidence’ (2001: 410), as is Masselos when he remarks on how Guha ‘recontextualizes the murder but in doing so places Chandra and her relatives and friends not only in the discourse in which they existed but in the discourse Guha and his colleagues are utopian moments of Small Things’) is his acute awareness of the historian’s ‘mediation of the insurgent’s consciousness’ and the ‘distortion’ that ‘follows necessarily’ from the ‘hiatus’ between an event (or consciousness) located in the past being recuperated by the historian in (and for) the present. Guha concludes, however, that the historian’s self-consciousness regarding ‘such distortion . . . might’ reduce the distance between the two ‘significantly enough to amount to a close approximation’ (Guha 1983a: 33). To return one last time to the claim in ‘Small voice’ I interrogated earlier, where, reading against the grain of what I took to be Guha’s lack of self-consciousness about his procedures (when he assumes not only an unmediated continuity between ‘women’s’ and ‘other small voices’, but also does not acknowledge his own appropriation of these in the interests of his ‘critical historiography’), I prodded the lack to assert instead the distance that separates Guha from these ‘small voice[s]’. In light, however, of what I have been suggesting above as the ‘utopian aspiration’ of his work, I wonder if one cannot in fact construe Guha’s lack of acknowledgment of his own (and others’) mediations as an attempt to erase, indeed, annihilate these mediations (and any self-consciousness thereof) that haunt contemporary theory’s meditations on representation. To read this way is to become aware of, and attend to as well, the ‘conditional and the subjunctive modes’ (Bartkowski 1989: 3) through which this moment in ‘Small voice’ is framed: ‘I feel that women’s voice once it is heard . . . ’; ‘If the small voice of history gets a hearing’ (Guha 1994: 12). Such an awareness, in turn, can lead one to re-read what might seem an unsustainable generalization as possibly a ‘utopian aspiration’, when Guha, linking ‘hearing’ with ‘listen[ing]’ in ‘Small voice’, notes: ‘To listen is already to be open to and existentially disposed towards: one inclines a little on one side to listen (1994: 9). ‘To listen’ in the way Guha specifies could be construed as a desired modality of radical openness to an ‘other’ – to ‘the small voice of history’.

Guha’s (utopian) desire to erase or refuse the distance between the historian (or writer) and the subject(s) whose histor(ies) he reconstructs (or writes about), and thereby to erase or refuse as well the problems that accrue to all attempts at representation, is neither unique to him nor new, although post-structuralist theories have certainly exacerbated and sharpened our perception of these problems. Other critically self-conscious writers have wrestled with something similar, formulating their attempts to resolve these sometimes via a ‘utopian aspiration’ in their work. For example, J. M. Coetzee, also a writer acutely aware of the dilemmas any self-consciousness about the task of representation entails, attempts their resolution via the following question in his White Writing. Noting that ‘our craft is all in reading the other: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities’, he asks: ‘Is it a version of utopianism (or pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when truth will be
(or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we will hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds?’ (1988: 81). What Coetzee phrases so cautiously as a question, Guha enacts in ‘Small voice’, thereby, within the ‘textual space’ of his essay, enacting as well what elsewhere in his work can only be the sign of an (impossible) possibility.

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establishing in the [Subaltern Studies] volumes’ (2001: 201). Nevertheless, the persuasive force of this essay derives precisely from the reader’s perception that Guha is, in fact, able to ‘place Chandra and her relatives and friends ... in the discourse in which they existed’ (emphasis added), because by virtue of the historian’s ‘bending close to the ground in order to pick up the traces of subaltern life in its passage through time’ (1997 [1987]: 36), Guha seems to have achieved the ‘impossible’: he seems to have annihilated the distance that otherwise separates the historian from the past, Guha from the subaltern. Thus, where the legal document can deliver only a reading framed by its own interests, Guha’s seems coterminous with that which ‘Chandra and her relatives and friends’ would provide.

23 I am indebted to Barnard’s (1994) fine essay on J. M. Coetzee for this insight.
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