East is east:
where postcolonialism is
neo-orientalist – the cases of
Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet. (Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ballad of East and West', 1892)¹

This chapter, which considers the continuing exoticisation of the other woman that is involved in the postcolonial privileging of her voice, begins with a symptomatic account of the remarkable critical reception in 1890s London of Sarojini Naidu (1876–1949), the Indian woman poet or 'little Indian princess', later Gandhi's right-hand woman.²

Born in Hyderabad into a prominent intellectual Bengali family, the Chattopadhyays or Chatterjees, Sarojini Naidu as a girl showed an extraordinary precocity in writing poetry, mainly in imitation of British Romantic writers: her ambition was to be 'a Keats for India'.³ At 15 she was sent to England, to King's College, London, and then Girton in Cambridge, both to continue her education, and – her parents' explicit desire – to separate her from the man who was anyway to be her future husband; as a non-Brahmin he was deemed unsuitable as a marriage partner. In 1892, the year of Kipling's 'The Ballad of East and West' which gives this chapter its epigraph, the remarkable facility of Naidu's poetry, collected in *Songs* (1895), her first book, came to the attention of the foremost English critics of the day, in particular Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symonds. Edmund Gosse was later to give an account of his encounter with this 'most brilliant', 'most original' work and of its outcome, an equally remarkable mimicry in reverse, which he would encourage:

By some accident . . . Sarojini was introduced to our house at an early date after her arrival in London, and she soon became one of the most welcome and intimate of our guests. It was natural that one so impetuous and so sympathetic should not long conceal from her hosts the fact that she was writing copiously in verse – in English verse. I entreated to be allowed to see what she had composed, and a bundle of MSS. was slipped into my hand. I hastened to examine it as soon as I was alone, but now there followed a disappointment, and with it an embar-

rassment . . . The verses which Sarojini had entrusted to me were skilful in form, correct in grammar and blameless in sentiment, but they had the disadvantage of being totally without individuality. They were Western in feeling and in imagery; they were founded on reminiscences of Tennyson and Shelley; I am not sure that they did not even breathe an atmosphere of Christian resignation . . . this was the note of the mockingbird with a vengeance.⁴

Disappointed, Gosse then took it upon himself, as he goes on to recount, to give Sarojini some fatherly advice: she should make herself over again, reconstitute herself as 'a genuine Indian poet of the Deccan', not 'a clever machine-made imitator of the English classics':

I ventured to speak to her sincerely. I advised the consignment of all that she had written, in the falsely English vein, to the waste-paper basket. I implored her to consider that from a young Indian of extreme sensibility, who had mastered not merely the language but the prosody of the West, what we wished to receive was . . . some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul.⁵

Confronted with this 'sincere' request – in effect a demand from the authoritative 'we' of western literary opinion, sanctioned by the promise of its still qualified praise – Sarojini did indeed 'docilely', in Gosse's words, strive to shed the trappings of her Romantic masquerade. The new literary daughter of the west (note the fatherly solicitousness implied by Gosse's first name terms), would 'write no more about robins and skylarks, in a landscape of our Midland counties, with the village bells somewhere in the distance'. She instead began to produce, no doubt to a great extent without cynicism, a very different type of pastiche, yet one which was ironically, and again symptomatically, another imitation of a western invention. In effect she was to recreate once more the 'tone of the mockingbird with a vengeance', though reverberating from a different vantage point. This would be not the west as the east due to its colonial education in the English classics believed it was to be seen, but the east as shaped by the west, represented by an eastern woman writing from the perspective of the west. In her second and third collections, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), and *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring* (1912), as Gosse goes on to write, Naidu no longer concealed 'the exclusively Indian source of her inspiration'.⁶ Addressing herself to 'emotions which are tropical and primitive', she now became, through her western make-over, 'fully' native: 'she springs from the very soil of India'. Combining technical skill learned outside 'the magic circle' of the Orient with inside knowledge, her poems, as Gosse says, will be found 'as luminous in lighting up the dark places of the East as any contribution of savant or historian'.⁷ In her own words from a January

1905 letter to Gosse, she now worked to 'add my little exotic flower to the glorious garland of English verse'.⁸

The bizarre and disturbing force of Naidu's ventriloquism is a fascinating instance of the double-voiced as well as doubled colonial mimicry of a European aesthetic. It is amply demonstrated, for example, in the decorative and fatalistic effects, and exotic details of spice and veil and *champak* threaded through *The Bird of Time* collection. Her complicated mimicry is worth an extended study in itself, and is probably only fully heard in juxtaposition, when her poetry is read side-by-side with an awareness of her career as a nationalist activist, her involvement in passive resistance and her rhetoric urging a 'battle' for India (see chapter 4).⁹ This rhetoric increased in force and focus across the 1910s till, with the coming of civil disobedience in the early 1920s, her poetic voice, disabled perhaps by its bad faith or split identification, fell completely away. What I am interested in here, however, is not so much Naidu's response as such, as the orientalisng and implicitly coercive terms of Gosse's critical appreciation. These terms were echoed in the praise she received from other European admirers, including Yeats, and the influential symbolist critic Arthur Symons, who appreciated in particular the sinuous sensualisms not only of her work, but of her physical presence clad in 'clinging dresses of Eastern silk'. As Symons rather barefacedly wrote: 'Through that soul I seemed to touch and take hold upon the East'.¹⁰ For him, Naidu's prose as well as poetry appeared as sensation embodied, vehemently sincere, 'un-English, Oriental' in feeling even though English in structure.

Symons's vocabulary of appreciation is evidently overheated and to our ears perhaps excessive, but not, when read alongside Gosse, untypical. Indeed, theirs are terms, I want to suggest, which repeat themselves across the twentieth century, and up to the present time, in western readings of foreign, especially perhaps Indian, writing. It is possible to find in recent criticism of postcolonial work a configuration of cultural differences between west and east, or north and south – between 'village bells' and bazaar cries – that remains not entirely dissimilar from that with which Gosse and Symons were working.¹¹ In sometimes imperceptible ways, the past of colonial discourse seems to reiterate itself within the present that is postcolonial criticism.¹² Despite postcolonialism's anti-colonial agenda, and its intersection with other liberatory theories such as feminism and minority discourses, forms of the criticism, as I will demonstrate, appear to have inherited still unexamined categories of the past, and to be repeating, certainly in their journalistic manifestations, its objectifications of otherness. These objectifications manifest in particularly acute ways traditional concepts of the other woman. Therefore, if the phenomenon under investigation here bears evidence of the postcolonialist commodification of non-western cultures also discussed by Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, it testifies at the same time to the

entrenched, gendered inflections of such processes, where the woman becomes the epitome of the ethnic, the exotic.¹³

At this point I want to engage in an exercise of juxtaposition – to keep the phrases and images used in the appreciation of Naidu's work in mind, and turn to look at the 1990s critical reception of an Indian woman writer, one hundred years on from the time of Gosse's ardent appreciation of Naidu, this English but 'un-English Oriental'. The writer is Arundhati Roy, much-hyped and hailed as the long-awaited female Rushdie even before winning the 1997 Booker prize for her best-selling first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), a publication well-timed for the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence.¹⁴

In the paragraphs that follow, I should immediately say, I want to set to one side the criticism of Roy's writing as lushly overwritten, overwhelmed by its poetic effects – though it is important to signal that such criticism certainly does exist.¹⁵ My penultimate chapter will attempt to discuss Roy's aesthetic and politics more on their own terms. Instead I want to focus on the elements that were repeatedly accentuated in the critical promotion of Roy in the west. First, most prominently, there was her being female in a group of predominantly male younger Indian novelists (Vikram Chandra, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Ardashir Vakil, many of whom are usually seen as standing in some sort of relationship to Salman Rushdie).¹⁶ Related to this was her intensely feminine, ineffably photogenic, elfin beauty.¹⁷ Another marked-out feature of her experience was her cross-caste, hybrid background (which is to an extent reflected in the central drama of the novel, the love affair between Ammu, the single mother of twins, and the Paravan Velutha). Added to this complex of promotional features there was also the 'overwhelmed' response of some of the first British readers of *The God of Small Things*, especially that of David Godwin her agent.¹⁸ Avoiding any significant mention of the novel's appeal to certain western cultural forms – the worldwide 1960s popularity of Elvis Presley, for example, or the influential representation of India in Merchant Ivory films – this powerful effect was critically accounted for by reference to the novel's 'exuberant', 'shape-shifting narrative'.¹⁹ Its remarkable 'linguistic inventiveness' and 'original' use of English were further regarded as of a piece with these protean acrobatics. Still in terms of the critical publicity, the work's verbal intricacy was seen as strikingly contrasted with its disturbing subject matter: the 'intimate and revealing portrait of the caste-system', especially the focus on the 'forbidden' sexual touch of the (almost godlike) Untouchable, and on the horrific punishment which follows it.²⁰ And as if this were not enough, the novel almost impossibly heightens the *ne plus ultra* of its cross-caste theme with its representation of child molestation and incest between twins. In some reviews, the layerings of contrasting extreme experiences, of national turmoil and personal suffering, of physical wounding and linguistic artistry, of pain accented by play, and play hollowing

out pain, were considered to be even further elaborated by the narrative's cultural and political interleavings. The novel was seen to stage the particular mingling of Hindu ritual, especially Kathakali performance, Marxist activism and Christian proselytising that typified social life in Kerala in and around 1969.

An unmissable feature emerging out of the juxtaposition of the 1890s and 1990s moments of reception of these two Indian women writers is that certain critical elements have resonated down the century, from the time of the acclaim for Naidu to the present day.²¹ Most prominent among these elements is the conflation of biography, female body and writing, which characterises the terms through which the works of both Naidu and Roy are perceived. Noteworthy, though not always typical, is also the singling out of a slight, feminine body shape as somehow corresponding to stylistic whimsicality, or specifically, Indian stylistic whimsicality, or as worth mentioning in relation to it. The decorated, sinuous and again 'feminine' writings of both poet and novelist are generally regarded as being appropriate to their eastern subject matter, including caste restrictions, but also as interacting evocatively with the distresses that they describe. Her 'lyric energy', Gosse writes of Naidu, has an intensity imparted by the sorrow implicit in her subject matter, and present in her life (presumably, the circumstances of her marriage)²² – the words could be a paraphrase of comments made about Roy whose bohemian lifestyle allegedly masks fascinating personal secrets.

The first thing to remark about these to me intriguing parallels is that there is of course very little that is new about a woman writer being either censured or praised, and, either way, objectified, on the basis primarily of her gender (reinforced by race or ethnic) identity. What is especially striking about the parallel instances of Naidu and Roy, however, is how the several interconnections converge in the notions, on the one hand, of lyric complexity and emotional intensity, and, on the other, of singular femaleness. In the case of Naidu, this convergence is also explicitly tied in with her being oriental, and her explicitly orientalist poetry. For Gosse she is the foremost Indian poet in English because her 'technical skill' illuminates her authentically 'tropical and primitive' emotion, that 'magic circle' of India present in her verse. To this sultry, delicate magic her femaleness is appropriately connected. The Orient with its perfumes and ardent sensations is for Gosse and Symons classically conceptualised as feminine (although, as chapter 4 showed, to Naidu herself the 'oriental female' signified loyalty and strength of character). But Naidu's femininity also labels her as a creature apart. As a *woman* poet of the Deccan she stands out as almost entirely unique, as a special witness. In her imitateness she is in some sense safely inimitable: there will be few more like her to intervene in western aesthetic perceptions of the east.

In Roy's case, in the so-called postcolonial 1990s/2000s, the western projection of an eastern identity on to an Indian writer appears to be less in evidence.

Yet, arguably, both in the attention paid to her ornate linguistic effects, and in the acceptance of her excesses (reflected in the book's success), there is a tacit understanding that this style in some way suits, while also contrasting productively and provocatively with, her Indian subject matter. The deft verbal play is set against the brutal ravages of caste prejudice, seen by westerners since at least the 1700s as an essentially oriental problem. Involved with this acceptance is also that excitement over Roy's unique position as the 'first' girl among the 'new boys'. In Roy's situation as in Naidu's, therefore, the critical interest in verbal effects, and the general responsiveness to their emotional, indeed 'tropical', intensity, are significantly inflected and perhaps also intensified by their being women writers, which is related to their writing *as women*, from familial, allegedly personal and domestic perspectives. (Here we might think, for example, of Naidu's somewhat stage-managed concern with purdah and child marriage, and Roy's with female frustrations in the domestic context, and with the status of the single mother in southern Indian society.)

Given that Naidu's poetry was seen to require a more oriental slant, and that the Orient of her verse was conceived in feminine terms, I now want to ask whether, in the postcolonial perception of Roy, a similar conflation has not taken place. It is a conflation which, I would suggest, bears characteristic signs of a gender-marked, even nationalist mode of thinking – one for which single, so-called typical images are held to mark an entire community. In relation to Roy this mode might most succinctly be described as new or neo-orientalist, as against the fact that Roy herself emphasises that the India she writes about is not extraordinary but ordinary.²³ Does the critical perception of Roy in western critical circles, in other words, not approvingly intersect her harrowing themes and verbal extravagance with her Indian/oriental and feminine identity (with comparatively little regard for the regional complexities of 1969 Kerala with which the novel is so intensely concerned)?

One response to this might be that an appreciation of Roy or of other Indian writers which lays a positive accent on the feminine qualities of the writing could justly be viewed as an inversion of conventional gendered values. In my view, however, any such inversion by a postcolonial text must be considered in the particular cultural and political context of its production and reception. The construction of a contemporary Indian literary femininity as at once typical and symbolic shines a searching light on the stereotyped ways in which the west continues to read the east, setting it up as a lasting emblem for its fascination with difference. From this a number of related questions emerge. Does the underlying characterisation of the oriental feminine in some postcolonial critiques (of which the critical reception of Roy is symptomatic), not leave embedded entrenched differences between an exotic and impassioned east and a consuming west, interested in yet distancing itself from that east's enticements and intensities? And does this characterisation not reinforce the

ways in which the west has always scrutinised and objectified the other, whether the east in the case of India, or the south more generally? Aren't there elements of this criticism that create a profound sense of *déjà vu*? Have Indian writers not been feted and exceptionalised in this way before, at the height of Empire, and feted in very similar terms?

Expanding these questions, the neo-orientalist tendency I want to underline is a critical inclination to regard as more culturally alive, interestingly authentic and intensively 'postcolonial' than other kinds of international writing, the extravagant realism and exuberant word-play associated with certain Indian writers, including Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy.²⁴ A criticism has developed that replicates inherited categories of colonial difference – in particular the objectification of otherness memorably described by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Yet again India is transmitted as multiple, extreme, scented, sensual, transgressive (obligingly complying with western concepts of itself), and as quintessentially feminine. It is an objectification that perhaps becomes particularly noticeable and worth questioning when a woman writer is involved. In this criticism we see locked together traditional characterisations of the eternal feminine and the eternal oriental – an interconnection that produces an equally traditional, gendered notion of orientalist typicality that has shifted, as it were, from racial character to text, and to writer's biography. To overstate the matter in order to make the point: the writing that is deemed most interesting and typical seems to be a writing that is perfumed, decorated, sinuous, sensuous, plural, unruly – most intensely and appropriately so when produced by a woman. Overdetermined in all its strangeness, abstracted from its local context, stereotyped and restereotyped, the exotic attraction of the once-colonised appears to have been imported into postcolonial criticism, and, in the process, to have been commodified and made safe for a western readership.

The critical interest in a still feminised Orient – an 'Indo-chic', to quote Padmini Mongia, or indeed an Indo-chick – leads on smoothly to the preoccupation of the last portion of this chapter. Here I consider in broader terms the neo-orientalist underpinnings of postcolonial literary criticism from the west, based in part on its location in the neoimperialist centre, and complicatedly manifested in the increasing prominence accorded Third World women writers.²⁵ Colonial modes of seeing and knowing were notoriously articulated through gendered metaphors of possession, penetration, and so on. It is therefore important for postcolonial critics to ask whether the current privileging of women writers as more fully, authentically or differently representing their alterity than others, can be taken as they would want to take it – as a justified privileging, an affirmative writing other-wise? Or do western critics in the process of such attention-giving risk deploying native women, as before, to signify, to catachretise, that which is most exotic, intriguing and strange about

once-colonised cultures?²⁶ Does the gendered primitive remain, though in a magic realist or postmodernised guise, the bearer of the west's exotic interests and subversive desires? In this regard it is worth being reminded that *The God of Small Things* tells a heated tale of multiply forbidden desire. Exquisitely narrated from a feminine point of view, it is a tale which takes place against the luxuriant tropical backcloth of south India, a relocated, velvety black and only semi-ironic 'heart of darkness' (*GST* 1, 52, 125, 204, 267).

In attempting to foreground the neocolonial and gender biases of some versions of postcolonial criticism, I am, I should belatedly stress, having to bracket the complicities and nuances of tone through which Roy's prose, as well as Naidu's writing, subversively confuses and throws sand in western eyes. In paragraph after paragraph of Roy's dense experimental narrative we see the English language – the language bequeathed by the British coloniser, as she has recognised – expanded, distorted, excavated, disconcerted. There is to my mind no question about the energy and oppositionality of this writing. But what *is* up for scrutiny are the evaluative vocabularies and critical techniques which, in the academy, and in the critical columns often supplied from the academy, are used to represent, for instance, Roy's work. Can these become correspondingly oppositional, self-critical and sensitive to creative ambivalence? Can they participate in a critical postcolonialism rather than a globalised 'postcoloniality'²⁷ without falling into the trap of objectifying difference?

In exploring the theoretical and institutional determinants of this situation further, we have to recognise how the mostly enabling currency of Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity, or Bakhtin on polyphony, have caused postcolonial literary subversions and multiplicity to become almost too expected as being always already there. These allegedly subversive features are in consequence seen as almost self-sufficient in their displacement from, and confounding of, a Eurocentric history. In a postmodern context of shattered temporalities and rejected essences, it has now become customary to view migrant or Third World texts as having the potential to undercut or reverse the west's foundational concepts, primarily on the basis of the writer's syncretic or migrant vantage point. This trend is exacerbated by the redemptive story of ethical progress which postcolonial criticism in the western liberal academy and in publishing circles tells itself: it represents itself as advanced, advancing and democratising because voices from the margins are being given a hearing. So a female Indian writer wins the prestigious prize which Rushdie first claimed for India not so long ago, establishing if there were any remaining doubt in the matter, the cultural striking back of the once-peripheral.²⁸ In short, wherever western-origin postcolonial critical attention touches down, in east or south, there is a tendency for mixing and multivocality, a feminine polymorphousness, to reproduce itself whatever the historical or cultural location (and for plainer, less adorned, realist writers to be sidelined). The impression

that results is of an energetic if bewildering babble of novelistic voices which can be best organised, it seems, simply by burying it under the title 'postcolonialism'. India in effect remains the teeming spectacle of the Grand Trunk Road in Kipling's *Kim* (1901), viewed god-like from on high. As Aijaz Ahmad puts it in a typically strenuous essay, 'the whole of the "Third World" . . . singularized into an oppositionality, [is] idealized as the site, simultaneously, of alterity and authenticity' – and, I would add, of femininity.²⁹

With this scenario in mind it is significant, as Arif Dirlik has also observed, that postcolonialism has emerged at a time when transnational capital continues to generate stark economic and power imbalances between different parts of the world – a time when globalisation has produced a neocolonial dependency of the chaotic, helpless 'rest' on the rational/ised, masculine west.³⁰ I do not want to go as far as Dirlik in suggesting a *knowing* complicity between postcolonial studies and global neocolonialism. I also do not wish to argue that postcolonial studies in some sense consciously does the ideological work of a global free market, in which cultural diversity is restlessly de-contextualised and commodified.³¹ Yet it does seem to me that postcolonial criticism *is* related to, and representative of, the continuing dominance of the formerly imperial metropolis. The dominance is indicated by such factors as the persistence of a (neo-)orientalist rhetoric, the location of critics, the subsequent direction of the postcolonial gaze at already 'othered' cultures, and, till recently, the relative neglect of transnational capitalism as a subject for discussion and critique. It is precisely because of this emphasis on the textual over the contextual that postcolonialism can in certain respects come to resemble both a camouflage for a still-powerful centre, and a subterfuge: an 'opportunistic [adjustment] by the centre of power to accommodate changes of power without loss of authority'.³²

To put it yet another way, postcolonial criticism has landed in terrain which under another aspect it knows all too well. Here is the familiar city – the appropriative metropolis; over there, beyond the city walls, are jungles, dangerous rivers, elephants and other exotic phenomena, the other against which the imperial city defines itself, and which it tirelessly monitors and seeks to control in order to maintain its ascendancy.³³ The difference now is that certain individuals and texts from out there, promoted by their class position or other elitist structures, have been admitted to the city the better to ensure the efficiency of its monitoring.

The question must then be, are there ways of cutting through this neocolonial and still masculinist bind in order to give the very real vitality and oppositionality of postcolonial literatures their due regard? It is evidently true that no cultural or academic interest in reversed values or subversive texts will of itself reverse hierarchies in the world, especially where these postcolonial interests themselves work within hierarchies which still exclude east and south. Yet

a criticism that remains continually vigilant about the neo-orientalist and feminising aspects of its own interpretative terms, and of its neocolonial context, will go some distance towards at least confronting if not challenging those hierarchies. In order to effect this vigilance it may be necessary to set up *contextualising temporalities*, histories or background stories that would reveal, for example, the many social, political and linguistic determinants that have shaped, and continue to shape, what we now call postcolonial hybridity. Roy's extravagant play with English, her 'compactness and intensity', does not simply float free of her time: it is in all likelihood politically motivated, as chapter 11 will show.³⁴ Women living out the contingencies of their lives break mythic moulds, even a mould as resilient as that of the eternal, oriental other. Alongside this, and at least as important, postcolonial readings also demand a sensitivity to agency, including once again women's agency, and an effort to relate interpretative practices to cultural knowledge. What, for instance, is the relationship of *The God of Small Things* to a vernacular tradition of Kathakali with its open-ended structures of narration? On related lines, Gayatri Spivak has usefully warned that any postcolonial reading must be approached as a continuously self-critical, contextualising and intensively 'inter-literary' rather than a conventionally 'comparative' exercise.³⁵

To circle round to where I began, it is imperative to remember that resistances emerge in texts just as much as they do in contexts: the point is to keep both in play – in play against one another so that neither lapses into prescribed Eurocentric moves. Through a restless layering and contortion of accepted meanings, postcolonial fictions, plays and poems, whether in English or in other languages, continually chafe at western self-reference and self-consolidation. Emerging from beyond established cultural borderlines, such texts assert a *verbal recalcitrance* or irreconcilability, an 'enunciatory disorder' as Homi Bhabha puts it: a strangeness which antagonistically and creatively interrupts western forms of understanding, such as the assumed conflation of biology and biography in the writing of the south.³⁶ It is not enough therefore simply to coat such resistance with the now over-familiar and still under-examined, though relatively safe term hybridity.

The mention of disorder and creative interruption finally returns me to what I mentioned earlier with regard to the wayward intricacies of Roy's writing, which I then had to bracket: the 'ambiguous unclassifiable consistency' of her writing, to adapt a quotation from the text itself (*GST* 30). The poems and the poetic exercises in prose of Naidu and Roy respectively, their stilted and skittish burlesques, and the evasive or over-stylised arabesqueries of their language, demonstrate a subtle subversion that at once co-operates with and exceeds the definitions criticism imposes. There is something chillingly composed in a poem of Naidu's like the two-part 'Songs of my city' from *The Bird of Time*. Different voices obediently perform a pastiche of a many-textured spice-rich

India which, in each one of the paired poems, comes to rest on images of silence and confinement, or death.³⁷

Differently though connectedly, Roy's writing persistently works at unsettling and undoing the English language. Strange attractions are created between words through rhyming and alliterative patterns. Grief-stricken, the mother Ammu's eyes are 'a redly dead', a 'deadly red' (GST 31). Having reached the age at which her mother died, the central character Rahel too is at 'a viable, die-able age' (GST 3, with many repetitions). Most predominantly, the childish play on language of the seven-year-old twins at the centre of the story shockingly literalises conventional actions and sayings, including phrases from Kipling ('we be of one blood, thou and I'), exposing hidden cruelties. At the film of *The Sound of Music*, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man 'moved Esta's hand up and down [his penis]. First slowly. Then fastly' (GST 103). Ammu, forced to leave Ayemenem after the discovery of her love affair, has to 'pack her bags and leave. Because she had no Locusts Stand I' (GST 159). As the narrative voice remarks: 'only the Small Things were said. The Big Things lurked unsaid inside' (GST 173). Throughout, the novel insists on this co-existence; the sometimes forgotten interaction of great and little 'gods', of grand and *petit* forces. In a country such as the one Rahel comes from, 'various kinds of despair competed for primacy': 'That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cosy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity' (GST 19).

In Roy as in Naidu, personal despair is caught up in and only seemingly dwarfed by 'the public turmoil of a nation'

Notes

- 1 Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ballad of East and West', *The Definitive Edition of Rudyard Kipling's Verse* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), pp. 234–8.
- 2 Naidu's poetry appeared in four collections published between 1895 and 1917: *Songs* (1895), *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917). The 'little Indian princess' is W. B. Yeats's term, according to Maud Gonne, *A Servant of the Queen* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938), p. 331.
- 3 Edmund Gosse, 'Introduction', *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death and the Spring*, by Sarojini Naidu (London: William Heinemann, 1912), p. 7.
- 4 Gosse, 'Introduction', pp. 4–5.
- 5 Gosse, 'Introduction', p. 5.
- 6 Sarojini Naidu, *The Golden Threshold*, intro. Arthur Symons (London: William Heinemann, 1905), was dedicated to Gosse and brought together the poems written since his intervention.
- 7 Gosse, 'Introduction', p. 6.
- 8 Makarand Paranjape (ed.), *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), pp. 44–6.

- 9 See also, for example, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (eds), *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 329–40.
- 10 Arthur Symons, 'Introduction', *The Golden Threshold*, by Sarojini Naidu, pp. 9–10, 18.
- 11 Here I follow Arif Dirlik's definition: 'North connotes the pathways of transnational capitalism, and South, the marginalized populations of the world, regardless of their location'. See Arif Dirlik, 'The postcolonial aura: Third World criticism in the age of global capitalism', in Padmini Mongia (ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 311. 'South' can also be read less metaphorically in that the rich countries of the world tend to be concentrated in the northern hemisphere.
- 12 Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 27–8.
- 13 See Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), in particular in this context chapter 2, 'Consuming India'. Huggan styles Roy as a prominent instance of the rise of 'Indo-chic'. See also Maya Jaggi, 'An unsuitable girl', *Guardian Weekend* (24 May 1997), pp. 12–18; Padmini Mongia, 'The making and marketing of Arundhati Roy', unpublished conference paper, University of Barcelona, Spain, September 1997; Sara Suleri, 'Woman skin deep: feminism and the postcolonial condition', *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1992), 756–69. The more or less simultaneous production and publication of this critical work in the 1990s, including my own essay on which this chapter is based, suggests that at least some mechanism of critical cutting-down-to-size is present within postcolonialism's inflated market in exotic goods.
- 14 Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997). Page references will be included in the text along with the abbreviation GST. Before 18 October 1997, the time of the Booker Prize ceremony, the novel was already reputed to have sold 500,000 copies in 18 languages.
- 15 See Shirley Chew, 'The house in Kerala', *Times Literary Supplement* (30 May 1997), p. 23; Alex Clark, 'Fatal distractions', *Guardian* (19 June 1997), p. B4; Michael Gorra, 'Living in the aftermath', *London Review of Books* (19 June 1997), pp. 22–3; Stephen Moss, 'A contest won in a vacuum', *Guardian* (15 October 1997), p. 3.
- 16 As confirmed in the *New Yorker* magazine's Golden Jubilee issue (23/30 June 1997), which carried a centrepiece photograph of most of India's prominent writers in English, with Rushdie, accompanied by Roy, in the foreground.
- 17 See, for example, Emmanuel S. Nelson, 'Arundhati Roy (1960–)', in Jaina C. Sanga (ed.), *South Asian Novelists in English: An A-to-Z Guide* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2003), pp. 218–22; 'Interview', *Vrij Nederland* (Amsterdam, 18 October 1997), pp. 18–19. Latterly, on the back of Roy's success, a number of Indian women (in most cases first) novelists have sprung into prominence, among others, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur, Ameena Meer and Shauna Singh Baldwin.
- 18 See 'CV: David Godwin', *Independent* (20 October 1997), p. B5.
- 19 See Gillian Beer, quoted in *Guardian* (15 October 1997), p. 3; and Alice Truax, review of *The God of Small Things*, *New York Times Book Review* (25 May 1997), p. 5. See also Floris van Straaten, 'Wreedheid als sleutel tot de liefde' (Amsterdam, 17 October 1997), p. 10.

- 20 Moss, 'A contest won in a vacuum', p. A3 and Truax, 'Review', p. 5.
- 21 Or, though to a lesser extent, from the time of the acclaim for Naidu's earlier compatriot Toru Dutt (1856–77), whose work was also taken up by Gosse.
- 22 Gosse, 'Introduction', pp. 7–8.
- 23 Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 277, and 'Neocolonialism and the secret agent of knowledge', interview with Robert Young, *The Oxford Literary Review: Neocolonialism*, 13 (1991), 226–7, has used the term *new orientalism* to describe the homogenising, de-contextualising effects of late twentieth-century multiculturalism. As will become evident later in this chapter, I prefer neo-orientalism because of its verbal analogy with neocolonialism.
- 24 In *The God of Small Things* this exuberance is accentuated of course by its famously erratic capitalisation.
- 25 See only, as a case in point, the host of critical studies of postcolonial women's writing cited in the bibliography to this book.
- 26 Here I take catachresis to refer to the contingency of reference or potential deformation inherent in any metaphor. See Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), for example, pp. 14, 188.
- 27 See Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, pp. 1–33, but especially pp. 5–7.
- 28 In this sense Terry Eagleton's line describing the persistence of total systems in a postmodern world can be applied to postcolonialism: 'The term "post", if it has any meaning at all, means business as usual, only *more so*'. See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 380–1.
- 29 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York and London: Verso, 1992), p. 33.
- 30 Dirlik, 'The postcolonial aura', pp. 294–320.
- 31 See Jon Mee's speculations on the ideological work done within India by the Indian novel in English: 'After midnight: the Indian novel in English of the 80s and 90s', *Postcolonial Studies*, 1:1 (April 1998), 127–14, especially pp. 132 and 134.
- 32 Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 178, and 149–50. For their comments on postcolonialism's neocolonial complicities, see also: Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 245–58, and Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (New York and London: Verso, 1997), pp. 3–4, 17–21, 185–203.
- 33 This is the kind of material that is almost too knowingly satirised in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2002), especially the second part, 'Rukhsana'.
- 34 See Aijaz Ahmad's remarkable 'rave' review of Roy's 'overwritten' narrative, 'Reading Arundhati Roy *politically*', *Frontline* (9 August 1997), pp. 103–8. Despite the novel's alleged sentimentality, misrepresentations of south Indian Communism, and failures in realism, he sees it as fully embodying its social world and as doing so in the medium of a decisively vernacular English.
- 35 Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 277; and see also her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 173. My view of contextualised temporalities as necessarily accompanied by verbal recalcitrance can be compared with Spivak's observation

that historical contextualisation remains self-consolidating of the west unless married to 'critical reading'. For a useful overview of the different interpretative axes inscribed or ascribed by postcolonial criticism, see Stephen Slemon, 'The scramble for post-colonialism', in Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (eds), *De-scribing Empire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 15–32.

36 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 126–7.

37 Sarojini Naidu, 'Songs of my city', in Elleke Boehmer (ed.), *Empire Writing: An Anthology of Colonial Literature, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 314–15.