

# The Journal of Commonwealth Literature

<http://jcl.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Domesticating the subaltern in the global novel in English**

Lee Erwin

*The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2012 47: 325

DOI: 10.1177/0021989412451589

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jcl.sagepub.com/content/47/3/325>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://jcl.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://jcl.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://jcl.sagepub.com/content/47/3/325.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 14, 2012

[What is This?](#)

# Domesticating the subaltern in the global novel in English

The Journal of Commonwealth Literature  
47(3) 325–339

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission: [sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav)

DOI: 10.1177/0021989412451589

[jcl.sagepub.com](http://jcl.sagepub.com)

[jcl.sagepub.com](http://jcl.sagepub.com)



**Lee Erwin**

University of Macau, Macao

## Abstract

This essay analyses prizewinning postcolonial novels in English from the last two decades that render labourers legible by enfolded them in the domestic novels still dominant in metropolitan reading practices. The figures of Hassan in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Triton in Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef*, Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Ugwu in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, though they initially enter the novels as labourers, are ultimately transformed through their roles in these domestic novels into exceptional figures who transcend class. At the same time, the novels address forms of violence that would seem to challenge the domestic novel's representational capacities. These novels then perform a double movement, gesturing toward class as a category in their inclusion of these domestic labourers, only to evacuate that category in rewriting the violence they portray as answerable by the personal relationships and identitarian transformations that constitute the genre's meanings. That the novels thus raise questions of class and subalternity – of relations of domination and subordination – and then translate those relations into other categories posited as primary bearers of textual and social meaning renders the category of class itself subaltern in these texts.

## Keywords

Khaled Hosseini, Romesh Gunsekera, Arundhati Roy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, domestic novel, class, subaltern

*He'll never be anything but a cook. (The Kite Runner, p.34)*

“But I am only a cook.” (*Reef*, p.121)

Ugwu took the sheets of paper from Mr Richard and, as he turned to make Baby's dinner, he sang under his breath. (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, p.425)

Can the subaltern cook? This seemingly flippant paraphrase of Gayatri Spivak's 1988 question might in all seriousness serve as a job description for a surprising number of figures in recent widely read postcolonial novels in English, raising the question of what

## Corresponding author:

Lee Erwin, University of Macau, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Av. Padre Tomas Pereira, Taipa, Macao.  
Email: [llerwin2@gmail.com](mailto:llerwin2@gmail.com)

makes (otherwise) subaltern figures legible to a metropolitan readership. There is in these novels a striking recurrence of the figure, whether member of an ethnic minority, Dalit, or villager, who enters a middle-class domestic space and performs both physical and emotional labour there; and while critics have considered the importance of everyday domestic practices (as well as the extent to which their depiction has been taken up in what Graham Huggan (2001) has termed the “alterity industry”),<sup>1</sup> less attention has been paid to the class makeup of the households involved. What happens, that is, to representations of labourers when such representations are enfolded into, and rendered legible by, the domestic plots still so prominent on metropolitan prize and bestseller lists? I consider Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, first published in New York in 2003 and “over five years on the New York Times bestseller list”; Romesh Guneseckera’s *Reef*, first published in London in 1994 and shortlisted for the Booker Prize; Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997 after a massive international bidding war and winner of the Booker Prize for that year; and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, first published in London in 2006 and winner of the Orange Prize. Their all having achieved either substantial sales or major awards, usually both, might speak to Huggan’s concern that while these awards are on one hand welcome as “a response to the globalisation of – especially English-language – literature,” on the other hand such a claim risks overlooking “the continuing asymmetries of power that are attendant on the production and consumption of world literature in English” (2001: 106).

One critical response to these asymmetries of power and to the homogenization potential in the production of literature within this “undifferentiated space of English” (Spivak, 2003: 72) would be to counter it with the depth of area knowledge Spivak sees as crucial (in tandem with linguistic knowledge) to a “planetary”, rather than “global”, study of literature. This response may be all the more compelling because of the way it dovetails with the longstanding geographical organization of literary studies; more troublingly, however, it also comports with what Huggan identifies as a potential “misprision of *national* or *continental* cultures” in metropolitan reading practices and their positioning of even “global [literary] migrants” as “‘native informants’ for their original (natal) cultures” (2001: 26-27; emphases in original). A complementary response, then, given the “historical relation” to one another into which global literary flows have brought contemporary texts (Black, 2010: 7), would be readings of those flows themselves, recognizing the ways in which languages, histories, and aesthetic forms negotiate not only with their national forbears but also with one another and – my particular concern here – with languages, forms, and reading practices already powerful in a globalized literary field. A criticism adequate to such “literary bordercrossing” (Black, 2010: 9) would need, then, to attempt something of the same bordercrossing, perhaps even “inhabiting the culture of imperialism in order to criticise it” (Huggan, 2001: 11). While I attempt to address the national and historical specificity of each novel, therefore, my central aim is to foreground and denaturalize patterns of representation that recur across a range of texts in this globalized literary field. The point is not that these novels (or their readers) are all alike, but that the domestic novel in its familiarity is capable of enfolded and making legible within a metropolitan literary scene a wide range of otherwise incommensurate historical concerns and cultural materials.

The use of the term “subaltern” for a focus on class in non-European contexts is also something that I approach with care. Subaltern studies theorists have resisted the potential Eurocentrism of imposing Marx’s mode-of-production narrative on colonized spaces, an imposition that enables the positing of all anticolonial agency as either merely “pre-political”, or class-based and thus originating from within the very logic of capital so imposed. Yet if subalternity can be read via a number of categories including class – in Ranajit Guha’s definition “the general attribute of subordination [. . .] whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (1982: vii) – it offers a conceptual terrain on which understandings not only of the intersections and overdeterminations of those categories, but also of the danger of their conflation or collapse into the categories most amenable to metropolitan literary representation, may be developed.<sup>2</sup> The conception central to subaltern studies of “considering representation as an aspect of power relationships between the elite and the subaltern” (Chakrabarty, 2002: 16), then, and of subalternity as what fails to emerge (or at least has not yet emerged) into hegemony, enables a consideration of what is foreclosed in one representational form still powerful in metropolitan culture, the domestic novel. However the position of each of these figures might have been read historically – as peasant, villager, artisan,<sup>3</sup> dependent child – class is fundamental to the way they are read into the texts: their entry as labourers into the domestic novel (and by extension into the institutions of modernity it helps to underwrite, for example small- and large-scale industrial production, the university, tourism, and scientific research) constructs them as classed at the outset. That the novels thus raise questions of class and subalternity – of relations of domination and subordination – and then translate those relations into other categories posited as primary bearers of textual and social meaning renders the category of class itself subaltern in these texts.

These works risk mystifying issues of labour by positing it not as exploitative but rather as transformative in the terms of the domestic novel already familiar in metropolitan reading practices, turning the erstwhile subaltern into a novelistic subject whose role in the domestic plot obviates the very questions of class that brought him into the text. Their central figures are portrayed as exceptional, crucial to private life within the household (and, as they are incorporated into it, to the construction of the nuclear family as normative to begin with), and capable of transcending class constraints as a consequence. So the Hazara servant’s son Hassan in Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* acts as a surrogate brother who is able to mediate between the narrator and his aloof father as well as ultimately, in the person of his own son, restoring wholeness to the narrator’s marriage; Triton, in Gunsekera’s *Reef*, not only becomes a highly skilled cook, but through his cooking serves to foster a whole domestic and social world around his reclusive master; the Dalit Velutha, in Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, is a surrogate father to the “two-egg twins” and lover to their divorced mother, serving, however temporarily in real time, as an emotional anchor in a divided and abusive family; and the houseboy Ugwu, in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, similarly anchors the domestic life of the central couple with knowledges no longer available to them as middle-class academics. It is striking, too, that these figures are so often male (often further counterpoised to more or less abusive homosexual others); they are neither the predominantly female foreign domestic workers whom Pheng Cheah (2006) suggests

stand outside the nation and thus outside constructions of the human itself, nor the female domestic workers *within* the nation whose role Spivak has analyzed as the creation of value out of the gendered body in a transition from “domestic (‘natural’ mother) to ‘domestic’ (waged wet-nurse)” (1987: 251).<sup>4</sup>

This may be so because these novels also explicitly address forms of political violence, portrayed as almost exclusively male, that subject the domestic genre to historical forces that test its representational capacities: the rise of the Taliban in *The Kite Runner*; the Marxist and Tamil insurgencies of the 1970s and beyond in *Reef*; Naxalite insurgency and caste violence in *The God of Small Things*; and the Biafran war of 1967 to 1970 in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Yet its seemingly apolitical subject matter by no means rendered even the traditional domestic novel an apolitical genre: as Nancy Armstrong (1987) argued in her Foucauldian treatment of the form, the domestic novel and the household it wrote into being are among the institutions wherein modern subjectivity was and is formed. This is a particular risk for representations of working-class figures – representations crucial, it may be, to portraying the nation in microcosm even in ostensibly postnational times, or, on the other hand, to fostering what Bishnupriya Ghosh has called “translocal solidarities” (2004: 8) – in that drawing these figures into the domestic may detach them from larger social formations and duplicate the rewriting of conflict as personal relationship that Armstrong argues was the task of the domestic novel from its inception. “By inscribing social conflict within a domestic configuration [. . .] one loses sight of all the various and contradictory political affiliations for which any given individual provides the site” (1987: 24). And whereas in Armstrong’s account the middle-class woman bore with her and wrote into being a new set of values, in these novels it is the labourer who is rewritten: the novels – poetic, funny, often passionately committed as they are<sup>5</sup> – can nonetheless be seen as working to contain violence by positing the domestic space as a class-free zone and individual desire as transformative. This distrustful view of the domestic novel may seem to ignore the form’s capacity to offer a counterpolitics of “proximity” (to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 2002 term) to dominant historiographies of economic globalization and state action;<sup>6</sup> yet these globalized domestic novels perform a double movement, gesturing toward class as a category in their inclusion of domestic labourers within their plots, only to evacuate that category in rewriting violence as answerable by the personal relationships and identitarian transformations that constitute the genre’s meanings.<sup>7</sup>

## Labourer to subject

*The Kite Runner* may seem to be the limit-text of this model, since in this novel the labourer is literally incorporated within the family at the end not by social inclusion but by biology. As Joseph Slaughter puts it:

Hassan turns out to be Amir’s half brother, and, given their shared patrimony, Amir’s redemption [of Hassan’s son] represents not so much an overcoming of ethnic prejudices [. . .] as a reunification of the natural family. This plot logic [. . .] does not suggest that Pashtuns should, in principle, treat Hazaras with dignity [. . .]; rather, it warns that some Hazaras may be Pashtuns, by nature (birth) if not by social convention. (2007: 321)

Thus when the narrator's father-in-law challenges the presence of "a Hazara boy" in the household Amir does not simply reply, "He's an Afghan" or "He's my son", but instead goes into the entire story to prove that in fact Sohrab is *not* actually a Hazara boy (Hosseini, 2003: 361).<sup>8</sup>

Yet the novel's resort to biology may be seen as productive as well, in that it suggests the trouble offered to narratives of proximity by the historical overdeterminations of class and ethnicity and the impossibility of simply delinking them within the text – of suggesting, that is, that accepting ethnic difference could answer the violence inherent in the class relations it underpins. By the same token, this novel makes no attempt to render labour invisible or transform it into a form of aesthetic fulfillment; Hassan lives in a servants' hut to the day he is killed and never ceases doing all the work in the household regardless of Rahim Khan's protestations (208). The novel even foregrounds its own incapacity to perform the crucial function of the domestic novel, namely the construction of a readable interiority in its subaltern figure: the narrator asks himself, "How could I be such an open book to him, when, half the time, I had no idea what was milling around in his head?" (61). The fact that this admission is followed almost immediately by the central event of the narrative, Hassan's rape by Assef, suggests that this novel, for all its clumsiness (as well as its reduction of the entire phenomenon of the Taliban to one half-German, Hitler-loving, paedophilic – inevitably homosexual – "sociopath" (38)), makes little attempt to replace a representation of the labouring body with a constructed subjectivity.

In contrast, other novels, more clearly domestic in form, strive to redefine the labouring body as a subject, one who performs what following Armstrong we might call "labor that is not labor" (1987: 75). Early in Gunesekera's *Reef*, for example, Triton finds that he cannot settle into his new domestic duties with Mister Salgado until he has driven away the monstrous Joseph (Caliban to his Ariel), whose drunken attempt to rape him demonstrates that Joseph is the failed subject who is incapable, "like the rest of his people" (1994: 39),<sup>9</sup> of performing the self-regulation required for entry into the middle-class domestic space:

But he didn't know what his limitations were; he thought just because he knew the habits of his superiors he could become one. [ . . . ] The dream just ate him up: first the brain, then the eyes, the throat, then the prick. As he grew older he grew thicker-skinned until he was all bone and meat: there was no space inside for a conscience, for morality, for any inner life. (52)

The interiority crucial to the novelistic subject is impossible in Joseph, who has become all body, "bone and meat"; as a consequence, says Triton, in an ironic register of the historical politics of that interiority, "We would undergo a revolution" (51).<sup>10</sup> What this means in practice is that in replacing the antagonistic Joseph (as well as the previous cook *Lucy-amma*), Triton transforms mere labour into aesthetic fulfilment and emotional meaning for the household he acts to construct, as his food and even his own desires, it is suggested, serve as lures for the woman and others who complete it. Triton's desires have been read as queering heteropatriarchy (Mannur, 2010), yet they often seem diffused across the entire household *as* household rather than focused on any one figure, as in the often-noted moment when to Nili's question to Salgado on meeting Triton, "Your cook?" Triton mentally responds, "*Your life, your everything*, I wanted to sing pinned up on the rafters, heaven between my legs" (75).

It may seem odd to include Roy's *The God of Small Things* among these novels of domestication, since it certainly addresses violence against the subaltern directly, and Velutha is moreover not exactly a domestic servant, though his work in the quasi-domestic family pickle factory, as well as the historical bondage of Dalit families to particular households in Kerala (Bhatnagar, 1999: 96), renders his position close enough that even so authoritative a scholar of caste as Susan Bayly terms him one (1999: 363). Yet while the relationship of the personal to the political has been argued extensively in regard to the novel,<sup>11</sup> and its most avowedly political critic, Aijaz Ahmad (1997), is also the most attentive to the literary conventions it deploys, its enfolding of Velutha into a conventional domesticity has not been examined. Though Velutha is seen participating in a Naxalite march early in the novel, for example, which as Alex Tickell argues might suggest that "the novel appears to acknowledge both [. . .] collective and subjective forms of postcolonial resistance" (2007: 75), the novel has already begun to translate Velutha entirely into the subjective register, as even the march itself positions him not as one of the exploited paddy workers but as one of the party workers or students who support them. The suggestion that it is not Velutha himself who is exploited is further reinforced by his failure to appear with his fellow workers from Paradise Pickles & Preserves, a barely individuated mass among whom "the early rumblings of discontent [are] concealed under a thick layer of loyalty" (1997: 172),<sup>12</sup> when they are forced to line up to greet Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol on their arrival from England. It is at this moment, in fact, that he is interacting playfully with Rahel under Ammu's envious eyes, and that Ammu first sees him as a man:

In the dappled sunlight filtering through the dark green trees, Ammu watched Velutha lift her daughter effortlessly as though she was an inflatable child, made of air. [. . .]

She saw the ridges of muscle on Velutha's stomach grow taught and rise under his skin like the divisions on a slab of chocolate. She wondered at how his body had changed – so quietly, from a flatmuscle boy's body into a man's body. (166-7)

Velutha is here domesticated into sexuality, and, individuated by the desiring gaze of the "little family", begins to appear as that modern subject whose self-making through education, physical culture, and a well-regulated household is the common sense of the domestic novel. Even his body has been, not damaged, but "molded" and "shaped" by labour (316), as if there is nothing in his work to which anyone might object, unless it crosses the line into the domestic interior: when Rahel and Estha bring him the small boat they have found and in their eagerness begin to sand it inside, "'Not here,' he [says] firmly. 'Outside'" (203). The anger and collective agency of Dalits and other exploited groups, glimpsed momentarily in the march and in the image of the decapitated landlord (66) (as well as the possible import of Velutha's four-year absence from Ayemenem) are almost lost in his assumption into a purely domestic scene, an operation that the text even foregrounds by his (no doubt self-protectively) positing the angry man in the march as a twin of his own, "Urumban" – "who lives in Kochi" (169) – and who is, not coincidentally, the one actually killed (or so the twins try to tell themselves) by the police (304).

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) stretches the domestic novel still further in its continuing to focus on "day-to-day life" (Adichie, 2006: 5) in the midst of atrocity and

war, in its alternating descriptions of food and cooking with descriptions of starvation and kwashiorkor, and in its ultimately positing its working-class figure, the houseboy Ugwu, as prospective author of the entire story of Biafra. Yet for most of the novel Ugwu, like Triton in *Reef*, is used as a “domestic eye”, a focalizer (though the third-person narrative shifts among Olanna, Richard, and Ugwu) whose sensitivity registers above all the emotional and social interactions of the central couple and the guests they entertain, even down to his “reading” of the table as he clears it after a dinner party. Even as late as Chapter 18, Ugwu’s response to voices raised in political argument within the house is to stop listening and go outside, where he first sees the young woman whom he will come to love (though also, more ominously, children playing at being soldiers); and though he has said to himself earlier that he needs to learn and to read – to an extent that he becomes a teacher of small children himself during the war – at only a single point do we actually hear the Ugwu within the narrative express a view of his own on the war. Expulsion from the domestic space will be required, as we shall see, to authorize Ugwu’s writing of the Book; at the same time it is his domestication within that space that constitutes him as a subject in what Susan Andrade (2011) might call “the nation writ small” to begin with.

It is also true that, in keeping with the novel’s broadly nationalistic aims, Ugwu is the bearer of knowledges that, though fundamental to the Biafran nation, are no longer available to the urbanized Odenigbo and Olanna, and becomes a “native informant” for Richard (and by extension the metropolitan reader) about his village’s customs. Even these knowledges, however, are ultimately enfolded into his role in the domestic plot, as in Chapter 22 his informing Olanna that Odenigbo’s mother used bad medicine to send Amala into her son’s bed leads Olanna (after her initial response, a curt “Rubbish”) to return to the house, where the couple reconciles.

The potentially subaltern figures in these novels, then, are no longer classed as labourers or members of any collectivity, and are instead marked out as individually exceptional – often, moreover, through transformative generosity on the part of the privileged. Triton and Ugwu are both identified in some form or another as “fast learners,” and explicitly, in the case of Ugwu – who will be sent to university by Odenigbo and Olanna<sup>13</sup> – “not a normal houseboy” (2007: 17); and both transform themselves above all by imitation of their masters (and more or less direct instruction in Ugwu’s case) rather than by pursuing any collective organization outside. Velutha, another exceptional figure, has been educated in a school established for Dalits by Ammu and Chacko’s grandfather, which nods to Roy’s actual family history (Tickell, 2007: 13) while downplaying historical efforts by Dalits themselves to gain access to education (see, e.g., Nafih, 2008).

## Subject to history

The category of class, then, evacuated as it is within these texts by assertions of individual mobility, is not surprisingly given little explanatory power over the violence they portray. Class and the violence intrinsic to class haunt the texts, yet are rewritten into other causalities more amenable to domestication, and, in the case of Adichie’s novel, national identity. At the same time, class continues to subtend the texts in that it is the classed subaltern *as* classed who is required to authorize the values they offer as transformative.



*Reef*, for example, though it postulates one historical causality for violence in an increasing unease, and a growing consciousness on Triton's part, as the Sri Lankan elections of 1970 and the Marxist insurgency of 1971 approach, works to overwrite that causality with more recent ethnic violence, via a prologue describing an encounter with a young Tamil refugee whose fears "breach" Triton's own defenses and inaugurate the narrative proper. This "breach", linked as it is with the breaching of "one's inner threshold" Salgado postulates near the novel's end (shortly before he returns to Sri Lanka to find Nili again after she has been attacked while protecting two Tamil families), suggests that if there is any identifiable causality to the violence that troubles Triton's memories it is the ethnic violence of the 1980s and 1990s, a causality susceptible to the novel's politics of domesticity, whereby the only response to those who "possess, divide and rule" is to "keep the flame alive from night to night, mouth to mouth, enlarging the world with each flick of a tongue" (184).

Moreover, as this violence is retrospectively read back into the novel from its earliest chapters, it is further naturalized as an aspect of human nature itself, a timeless capacity of all flesh, here interpreted quite literally. Alongside its "consumable" exoticism (Jayawickrama, 2003), that is, the language of food that fills the novel not only takes on a positive timelessness in *Lucy-amma's* assertion that "the way you swallow food, like the way you make babies, has not changed throughout the history of mankind" (25), but is also itself frequently imbricated with violence as well. Joseph himself, for instance, undergoes a form of violent consumption ("the dream just ate him up") that turns him into food, "all bone and meat"; and throughout the novel images of meat sliding down throats (100) and knives "teasing out little scraps of flesh from cartilage and soft bone" (104) suggest less a safe domesticity than a naturalized, barely contained violence that seems to repeat itself in different registers throughout history, from the "baskets of dead fish" at the market Triton and Nili visit (128) to the fisherman burning "heaps of the dead in bigger mounds than the fish they caught" of the *Anguli-maala* story (177) and finally the bodies "roll[ing] in the surf" and "beached by the dozen" in the insurgencies and countervailing state violence of 1971 and subsequent decades (183). Thus too even Triton's own brief politicization, during a poker party held in the run-up to the 1970 elections – when he responds to a call of "Triton, *kolla* [boy], beer!" from inside the house with a raised fist, a wish that he had finished his schooling after all, and a conviction that Wijetunga, Salgado's Marxist assistant, had "worked it all out" – is threatened by a resurgent vision of Joseph, figure of the subalternity he has disavowed, saying "*Eat it, kolla, eat it*" (164).

Killing and eating are linked perhaps most significantly in the *Anguli-maala* story Triton is asked to repeat to Salgado near the end of the novel, and it is in this story, and most of all in its telling by Triton, that the novel's convictions become clearest. The novel has hinted that Triton himself first comes to Salgado's because he has already participated in the violence that will emerge full-blown later, as he is brought by an uncle who seems tortured by some unspoken disturbance:

My uncle wriggled next to me. "As I told before, he can learn quickly but he cannot live at home any more. That trouble . . ."

I had burned the thatched roof of a hut in the schoolyard by accident. I only dropped a single match flaring down the mouth of my father's almost-empty arrack bottle: a whistle of blue flame shot out and climbed the *cadjan* fronds. My father went mad [. . .]. (17)

And late in the novel, when Triton is considering the violence being committed by young men “who looked no different from me”, he again, significantly, recalls his “fervent schoolmaster”, whom he had found lying injured in a ditch “that unsettled month that ended with me coming to Mister Salgado’s house”. The connection to Triton himself, if there is one, is unclear – “His legs had been broken by a bunch of older boys who used to huddle in a hut in the schoolyard and chant the slogans of a shrinking world” (189) – yet coupled with the earlier suggestion that he had set fire to what may have been that same hut it suggests that Triton himself may be *Anguli-maala* or Ahimsaka, the teacher’s favourite who turns to violence, and that his being asked for the story by Salgado, whose earlobes have already been described as “divinely long” (66), is a form of tutelage that recalls Ahimsaka’s reformation by the Buddha.

It is true that who is tutoring whom here is an open question, as the novel attempts to suggest the classlessness of human fallibility: Salgado asks for the story not only on learning of a friend’s disappearance but also after he himself has succumbed to the generalized madness of late 1970 – “a hunger for violence took grip everywhere” (175) – to an extent that Triton sees him as “disfigured” by his rage at Nili and hears his voice “[turn] ugly” (166). Yet class still subtends the novel’s violence in that Marxism and Buddhism have already been placed in opposition in Wijetunga’s “Five Lessons”, which are not the Precepts that Triton imagines but “the simplified lessons that explained the crisis of capitalism, the history of social movements and a future shape of a Lankan revolution” (121). Thus it is crucial that Triton himself, the subaltern whose class position most plainly assorts with Wijetunga’s claim that all of Sri Lanka will be made into “servants” by international capital (121), articulate the counterclaims of individual enlightenment and moral reformation that the *Anguli-maala* story proposes. Triton’s reformation can never be complete – even in London among the water-themed books Salgado offers him (185) is *Ginipettiya*, whose title could mean either a well-known “matchbox”-shaped canal in Sri Lanka or, literally, a matchbox – yet by the novel’s end it is Triton who articulates the values of his (now cosmopolitan) domestic “vocation” (190), values authorized by a classed position that are in that same articulation disavowed.

Roy’s novel is as explicit as Gunasekera’s is ambiguous in its construction of history, though it too suggests that history has to be understood on a scale so vast (“thousands of years”) as to become virtually ahistorical: “before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy, before Vasco de Gama arrived, before the Zamorin’s conquest of Calicut. [. . .] before Christianity arrived [. . .]” (33). Noticeable here (in addition to the implication that “the Marxists” came from outside like the long string of colonial powers that follows), is the implication that the “Love Laws” codified by Manu, laying down “who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33) stand above and beyond all subsequent history, and that rather than caste taking on new forms and meanings with historical change, on the contrary all historical change is enfolded into caste. It may well be that the Communist party in Kerala succeeded in part by “working *within* the communal divides” (67), as the novel asserts, yet this seems to give total explanatory power to caste and caste alone, figured as laws that not only stand outside change but also offer only categories to be disrupted and boundaries to be crossed, not specific forms of labour and other expropriations that might demand wider social action.

It may be that Ammu's desire is in part born of her hope that "it *had* been [Velutha] that Rahel saw in the march", "that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (167); yet here his anger has become hers, "smugness" and "order" its only targets, and her soon-to-be-acted-upon desire seemingly its only realization. What threatens to reappear here is what Susie Tharu in an analysis of a Gita Hariharan story has called the "agent-self", the "humanist individual", who by "[recasting] the grievances of women and of dalits to present itself as answer [. . .] renders their historical and present-day struggles redundant" (2001: 194).<sup>14</sup>

If what might more easily be thought of as a cry of outrage at social injustice can be seen to offer itself nonetheless as "answer", it may be because the novel contains even Velutha's murder within the realm of family vendetta, as it is Baby Kochamma, only secondarily abetted by Comrade Pillai, who sees to it that the police are set on Velutha and given a rationale for their assault afterwards. While the familial and the political are no doubt imbricated in much real-world caste violence, the novel's creation of such an elaborate chain of cause and effect (the twins' discovery of the boat; the Orangedrink-Lemondrink man's abuse of Estha and the twins' subsequent recourse to the History House; Sophie Mol's accidental drowning; Baby Kochamma's opportunistic vindictiveness) almost seems to find it necessary to explain Velutha's death, though it is not a historical rarity. Such an elaboration of the plot seems, oddly, actually to underplay the historically specific dangers for any Dalit of engaging in such a relationship (and thus excuse Ammu's at least marginally greater freedom to take such a step); yet at the same time this narrative determinism, built on a whole concatenation of contingencies, strives to reconfirm the immutable status of "untouchability" that it has posited from the outset. Even the later incest between the twins seems further to enclose the family within itself, in a bitterly ironic "excess" of endogamy to set over against the "excess" of exogamy represented in the Velutha–Ammu coupling. As a consequence, as in *Reef*, class is rewritten into the domestic values of attachment and private transcendence, here via Velutha's virtual deification.

Among these novels Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* offers the most nearly complete separation between questions of classed subalternity and the history of violence; yet here that separation is the result of a more fully particularized history than in *Reef* or *God*, as the novel works to identify its central conflict, the Nigerian–Biafran war of 1967 to 1970, as the consequence of specific British policies that racialized sub-Saharan Africa and favored Nigeria's North.<sup>15</sup> Class as a category is necessarily sublated into "race" in this novel, then, as its subaltern figure must be fully integrated into, and even come to speak for, the new Biafran nation. What this necessitates is a vision of a more egalitarian society, and far more fluid social boundaries, than is offered by the other novels. A single chapter, for instance, sees visits from both Ugwu's and Odenigbo's mothers – both village women committed to understandings distinct from those of the academics of Nsukka – and their juxtaposition suggests that only luck or happenstance (or even simply generational difference) separates Ugwu's position from that of Odenigbo (or for that matter Olanna, whose family's wealth is also recently acquired). Indeed, Odenigbo not only makes the remark that Ugwu must not call him "sir" because "sir" is arbitrary – "You could be the 'sir' tomorrow" (2007: 13) – but also points out to Olanna that he himself

used to smell like Ugwu before he left his own village to attend secondary school (2007: 49). And, of course, it is Ugwu, and not the British Richard, who will be the writer of the story of Biafra, *The World Was Silent When We Died*, suggesting, as John Marx points out, a “democratization” of historiographic authority (2008: 527).<sup>16</sup>

Yet the novel does little to suggest that Ugwu’s authority has arisen from the domestic world in which we have seen him ensconced, even though that world also incorporates a careful cross-section of Nigerian ethnicities and intense and ongoing political disputations. Only when he is conscripted into the fighting (and this after being “rescued” for domesticity the first time he was taken by Mrs Muokelu and Olanna herself) do we see an actual engagement with “book” and reading, specifically in Ugwu’s discovery of a battered copy of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in a school the troops have taken over. Not that the other soldiers read – High-Tech uses a page of the book to roll a joint – but it is only here, as he is dragged outside the domestic (even participating in a gang rape), that Ugwu himself is seen reading in detail, and that he begins to write his way back to his beloved, Eberечи. Eva Cherniavsky has suggested that the body of the conscript, as of the slave, has no “property rights” to its own subjectivity, and thus no interiority at all but only “*extroversion*” (2006: xvii; emphasis in original): as this novel puts it, “[Ugwu] was not living life; life was living him” (2007: 364). And it is Ugwu’s extroversion that produces a supplement to the domestic text in *The Book*, a “Narrative of the Life of a Country”, as Ugwu first plans to call it, in which judging from the excerpts offered there is no novelistic interiority at all and in which the raced body of the slave becomes the Biafran nation subject to British-colonial racism. Thus *Half of a Yellow Sun* simultaneously recasts the domestic by positing it as the place where the nation lives, and yet troubles its own domestication of the labourer by making him implicitly the “slave” whose body is still not his own and who can begin to write only from a position outside. The identification of slave and nation thus produced seemingly subsumes one in the other; yet it depends for its representational force on the retention of classed subalternity in that figure who is in the same movement identified with the nation as a whole.<sup>17</sup> In other words, though Olanna and Odenigbo are certainly Biafrans, too, their classed position makes it impossible for them to stand in for the slave who is the nation. Lost in Ugwu’s translation, however, as in Triton’s transformation and Velutha’s deification, is class as an independent category *within* the domestic text.

Thus contemporary global novels in English may be seen to be both constrained by and straining against the domestic form, raising the possibility that one figure who now works to authorize the operations of capital is not the woman in the domestic space naturalized by the novel two centuries ago but the male labourer (still) in the domestic space. As the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic novel, according to Armstrong, served to construct a “woman” who bore only a nominal relationship to actually existing women, and in the process consolidated the rising middle class in England, the contemporary domestic novel runs the risk of similarly constructing a “subaltern” whose apotheosis into cosmopolitan, erotic, or national forms of transcendence may continue to stand in for transformations of entire social formations and their relations of production. If the domestic novel is still that “place in the mind”, in Armstrong’s words, that “allows masses of diverse individuals to coexist within modern culture” (1987: 258), we need to be attentive to the political work it continues to perform.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Jayawickrama (2003); Mannur (2010); Salgado (2007: 158); Wagner (2007).
2. For some of the debates surrounding these issues see, for example, the essays collected by Vinayak Chaturvedi in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (2000) and by David Ludden in *Reading Subaltern Studies* (2002), as well as Chakrabarty's "Small History of Subaltern Studies" (2002: 3-19) and Walter Mignolo's "On Subalterns and Other Agencies" (2005). In Nigeria, too, there was Wole Soyinka's debate with the Ibadan-Ifo Group over the applicability of Marxist categories to Nigerian experience (Jeyifo, 2004: xiii-xiv; see also Ambrose, 1995; Newell, 2006: 159-71). Yet as regards class, at least, from within Latin American subaltern studies John Beverley argued that "in the range of determinations expressed in Guha's definition of the subaltern [. . .], subaltern studies must return to the issue of class inequality and exploitation, because class is the form of subalternity that structures the others" (1999: 166), and Spivak has suggested that while a major thrust of the subaltern studies group's historiography was that "[t]he lesson that Gramsci taught was that class alone cannot be the source of liberation within subalternity [. . . t]he problem is that subaltern studies now seems not concerned about class as an analytical category at all" (2010: 232).
3. Devon Campbell-Hall's (2002) focus on Velutha's role as an artisan is important but retains a focus on individual empowerment and also does not consider where and how those skills were acquired.
4. There are texts that try, even within the confines of the domestic novel, to address the class conflict that lives at home and to the imbrications of affective and bodily labour in those spaces. Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day* (2008) and Thrity Umrigar's *The Space between Us* (2005), for example, consider the damage done to the domestic worker by her enforced assimilation into a position within the family that is at the next moment exposed as untenable, as does Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and its treatment of the male cook Panna Lal. Another recent Man Booker prize-winner, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), ironizes the notion of the servant as "part of the family" to the extent that Balram succeeds in his upward strivings only by killing his master (or, as he calls him, his "ex").
5. The "deep-seated sympathies for Dalits" of *The God of Small Things*, for example, have been recognized by the Kerala Dalit Sahitya [Literary] Akademi (Nair, 1993).
6. For example, J. Edward Mallot argues that in *Reef* "food reminds readers of domestic, intimate counter-histories" (2007: 84).
7. As Timothy Brennan has put it, one insight of earlier anti-imperialist writing rejected by a more recent cosmopolitan aesthetic is that "the language of race and ethnicity always accompanies, and often conceals, the language of class" (1997: 40).
8. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
9. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
10. For a discussion of *Reef* as potentially subversive postcolonial bildungsroman see Vázquez (1997); Walter Perera, on the other hand, says bluntly that Triton is "contemptuous of his own class" (1995: 67). Minoli Salgado discusses the criticism to which Gunesequera, as "arguably the most controversial Sri Lankan expatriate writer writing today" (2007: 149), has been subject.

11. See, for example, Ahmad (1997); Bahri (2003); Bose (1998); Ghosh (2004); Wilson (1998).
12. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
13. Chinua Achebe offers a harsher view of class and domestic labour in “Vengeful Creditor” (1972), in which the red ink with which the young baby-nurse Vero attempts to kill the child in her care represents both the schooling denied her and the unpaid debt owed her by her employers.
14. One index of the trouble these issues have given critics is the frequent resort to “nature” or biology as either rationale for, or transformative potential of, the relationship (see, for example, Bose, 1998; D’Cruz, 2003; Needham, 2005). Anuradha Dingwaney Needham’s balanced reading identifies a larger social meaning in Ammu and Velutha’s coupling by citing Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar to the effect that “[f]usion of blood alone can create the feeling of being kith and kin”. Yet Ambedkar went on to say: “[H]olding inter-caste dinners and celebrating inter-caste marriages is a futile method of achieving the desired end. The real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras” (1945: 46-7). And while Kalpana Wilson argues strongly that “[Roy’s] originality lies in the way she manages to show us the interconnections between the deep contradictions within this [bourgeois] family and those between the social class they belong to and the working people” (1998) I continue to see those interconnections disappearing within the text.
15. The novel insists on the specificity of that history: the author of *The Book* “is careful not to draw parallels” (82).
16. Chima Anyadike suggests that *The World Was Silent When We Died* (which she sees as in part Richard’s) also replaces *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, the exemplary British-colonial text in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, “in Africa’s meta-fictional world” (2008: 148).
17. The troubled relationship of class and nation within the novel might also be seen in Odenigbo’s contradictory metaphorizing of Tshombe’s Katanga as a mere “houseboy” (presumably a “normal houseboy”) to “the Americans and the Belgians” (10).

## References

- Achebe C (1972) Vengeful creditor. *Girls at War and Other Stories*. London: Heinemann, 48-69.
- Adichie CN (2006) Author profile. *World Literature Today* 80(2): 2-5.
- Adichie CN (2007) *Half of a Yellow Sun*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Adiga A (2008) *The White Tiger: A Novel*. New York: Free Press.
- Ahmad A (1997) Reading Arundhati Roy *politically*. *Frontline* 14(15): 103-108.
- Ambedkar, BR (1945) *Annihilation of Caste* (4th ed). Delhi: Gautam Book Centre.
- Ambrose CS (1995) The Ibadan-Ife Group, Ngugi, and “revolutionary realism”. In Cantalupo C (ed) *Ngugi wa Thiong’o: Texts and Contexts*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 193-206.
- Andrade SZ (2011) Adichie’s genealogies: National and feminine novels. *Research in African Literatures* 42(2): 91-101.
- Anyadike C (2008) The global North in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*. *Global South* 2(2): 139-149.
- Armstrong N (1987) *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bahri D (2003) *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bayly S (1999) *Caste, Society, and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Beverley J (1999) *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bhatnagar V (1999) Fictions of caste: Dalit characters in the modern Indian novel. In Dodiya J and Chakravarty J (eds) *The Critical Studies of Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 93-107.
- Black S (2010) *Fiction across Borders: Imagining the Lives of Others in Late Twentieth-Century Novels*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bose B (1998) In desire and in death: Eroticism as politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *ARIEL* 29(2): 59-72.
- Brennan T (1997) *At home in the world: Cosmopolitanism now*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Campbell-Hall D (2002) Dangerous artisans: Anarchic labour in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Anil's *Ghost* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *World Literature Written in English* 40(1): 42-55.
- Chakrabarty D (2002) *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chaturvedi V, ed (2000) *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. London: Verso.
- Cheah P (2006) *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cherniavsky E (2006) *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- D'Cruz D (2003) Configuring the dynamics of dispossession in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 5(2): 56-76.
- Desai K (2006) *The Inheritance of Loss*. New York: Grove.
- Ghosh B (2004) *When Borne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Guha R (1982) Preface. In Guha R (ed) *Subaltern studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford, vii-viii.
- Gunasekera R (1994) *Reef*. New York: New Press.
- Hosseini K (2003) *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead.
- Huggan G (2001) *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge.
- Jayawickrama S (2003) Consuming desire: Identity and narration in Romesh Gunasekera's *Reef*. *Postgraduate English* 8. Available at: <http://www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english/reef.html>
- Jeyifo B (2004) *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ludden D, ed (2002) *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia*. London: Anthem.
- Mallot JE (2007) "We are only what we remember, nothing more": History and healing in Romesh Gunasekera's *Reef*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42(3): 83-98.
- Mannur A (2010) *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Fiction*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Marx J (2008) Failed-state fiction. *Contemporary Literature* 49(4): 597-633.
- Mignolo WD (2005) On subalterns and other agencies. *Postcolonial Studies* 8(4): 381-407.
- Nafih M (2008) Ayyankali: Legacy of organic protest. *Countercurrents.org*. Available at: <http://www.countercurrents.org/nafih031108.htm>
- Nair RM (1993) In solidarity: Novelist Arundhati Roy expresses solidarity with the cause of Dalits and Dalit literature. *Frontline* 16(3). Available at: <http://www.flonnet.com/fl1603/16030810.htm>

- Needham AD (2005) "The small voice of history" in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Interventions* 7(3): 369-391.
- Newell S (2006) *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Perera W (1995) Images of Sri Lanka through expatriate eyes: Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef*. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 30(1): 63-78.
- Roy A (1997) *The God of Small Things*. New York: Random House.
- Salgado M (2007). *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. New York: Routledge.
- Samarasan P (2008) *Evening Is the Whole Day*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Slaughter JR (2007) *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Spivak GS (1987) *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Spivak GS (1988) Can the subaltern speak? In Nelson C and Grossberg L (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 271-313.
- Spivak GS (2003) *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Spivak GS (2010) In response: Looking back, looking forward. In Morris RC (ed) *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press. 227-236.
- Tharu S (2001) The impossible subject: Caste and desire in the scene of the family. In Rajan RS (ed) *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 187-203.
- Tickell A, ed (2007) *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. London: Routledge.
- Umrigar TN (2005) *The Space between Us*. New York: Morrow.
- Vázquez JSF (1997) Subverting the Bildungsroman in postcolonial fiction: Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef*. *World Literature Written in English* 36(1): 30-38.
- Wagner TS (2007) Boutique multiculturalism and the consumption of repulsion: Re-disseminating food fictions in Malaysian and Singaporean diasporic novels. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42(1): 31-46.
- Wilson K (1998) Arundhati Roy and the Left: For reclaiming "Small Things". *Liberation: Central Organ of CPI(ML)*. Available at: [http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year\\_1998/january/books.htm](http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_1998/january/books.htm)