

CONFIGURING THE DYNAMICS OF DISPOSSESSION IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE* & ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

*DOREEN D'CRUZ*¹
Massey University

Postcolonial discourse of recent years has circulated in its wake such themes as diaspora, hybridity, and orientalism, which are necessarily implicated in the promotion of knowledge about the relationship between subaltern subjectivities and cultures, on the one hand, and empire and the relics of empire, on the other. While this aspect has to be an inevitable dimension of postcolonial thought, the focus of *these* discourses, either upon the Western construction of knowledge about the orient or upon the terms of contact between the colonized and colonizer, necessarily directs attention away from the modes of power that define the relationship between traditional groups that make up the postcolonial nation. Implicit in this orientation are two assumptions: firstly, that cultural domination emanates primarily from the Euro-American axis, and secondly, that the postcolonial subaltern position is homogeneous in character. What are ignored or under-recognized in the process are those indigenous structures of domination and oppression that predate European colonization.²

¹ Doreen D'Cruz (D.Dcruz@massey.ac.nz) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of English and Media Studies at Massey University, Palmerston North. She is the author of the book *Loving Subjects: Narratives of Female Desire* (Peter Lang, 2003), and of articles on Shashi Deshpande, Elizabeth Jolley, and Toni Morrison. Her current research interests cover the nexus between materialist and idealist approaches to knowledge in the context of literary studies.

² I am referring here to the caste system and its corollary, the phenomenon of Untouchability. See Asha Krishan's *Ambedkar and Gandhi* 1-32, which provides a summary of different theories about the origins of Untouchability. One of her sources is Vivekananda Jha, who lists four stages in the "origin and growth of Untouchables." The first stage, which extended to about 600 BC, was the period when tabooed sections of society emerged. According to Krishan's summary of Jha's arguments, the Rigveda shows "no evidence of any people with whom contact was taboo even remotely." The later Vedic texts too give no indication of "the practice of Untouchability although the tribal groups of the Candalas and Pulkasas [are] mentioned with contempt and existed at the lowest social level but they were not treated as Untouchables." The second phase, which lasted till 200 AD was the period

If one were to interpolate those structures into postcolonial discourse, it would be seen that the postcolonial subject exists in at least two dimensions, one that emanates from colonial and postcolonial cultural politics, and the other from indigenous forms of social stratification. In this essay, my purpose is to examine how two forms of social and cultural hierarchy, one relating to caste, and the other to gender, operate in two Indian texts, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, to dispossess individuals of human, democratic, reproductive, and libidinal rights.

The narrative present of Mistry's novel, published in 1995, covers the years between 1975 and 1977 when India was placed under a state of Emergency by Mrs Indira Gandhi, in order to avoid the political consequences of being found guilty of electoral fraud.³ The present is punctuated by flashbacks to scenes from before Independence, from during Partition, and from the period after Independence, when it was becoming apparent that political rhetoric and government action on promised social reforms have failed to coincide. The Emergency functions as a massive instance of post-Independence disillusionment with governmental processes. The novel culminates in a shift forward to 1984, to the days after Mrs Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. Mistry's novel works through a series of loosely strung episodes, relying for continuity on a stable set of characters. The episodes portray the personal histories of an Untouchable family, of the young Parsi student Maneck Kohlah, and of the central female protagonist, Dina Dalal, against the canvas provided by the political history of India's shift to independent nationhood and beyond.

when Untouchability began to take "definite shape." In the third phase, the groups that constituted the Untouchables increased in number and the practice intensified. In the fourth and final phase, which culminated in 1200 AD, "the ranks of Untouchables swelled" even further, and the practice reached its peak (Krishan 8-9). Jha's arguments are contained in his essay, "Stages in the History of Untouchables," which appeared in the *Indian Historical Review* 2.1 (July 1975). On the other hand, Susan Bayly, in her volume of the *New Cambridge History of India*, gives centrality to the resurgence of caste hierarchy in the eighteenth century through the re-assertion of Brahminical power "in a number of important post-Mughal realms, most notably in the Maratha domains." According to her, the post-Mughal Brahminical supremacy produced a caste-oriented society throughout the sub-continent, emphasizing ritual purity. She maintains that the "caste-centred India" that anthropologists like Dumont have represented is attributable to this eighteenth-century resurgence rather than being continuous with "an ancient Hindu past" (64-65). The juxtaposition of these two accounts suggests to me that even if caste boundaries and the caste orientation of Indian society may have been relaxed in certain periods of Indian history, caste itself as an ideal system as well as the dichotomy between the pure and the impure spring from the Hindu past.

³ On 12 June 1975, the Allahabad High Court found "Mrs Gandhi's 1971 election invalid on the grounds of corrupt practices." Following this, on 26 June 1975, the President of India, on the request of Mrs Gandhi, declared a state of Emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution. Then Parliament moved quickly to pass "new electoral laws superseding the laws under which Mrs Gandhi was found guilty and her election voided" (Brass 41).

Mistry's novel begins with the convergence of three sets of characters in Dina Dalal's flat in 1975. Dina is a Parsi widow in her forties desperate about maintaining her independence, which is symbolized by her possession of the flat. In order to keep herself financially afloat, she accepts tailoring contracts from an export firm, and advertises for two tailors who would work in her flat, making clothes to order. Ishwar and his nephew Omprakash are two tailors from one of the Untouchable castes, who have come to the city in search of work, and they answer Dina's advertisement. To further support her independence, she takes in a paying guest, Maneck Kohlah, a student and the son of an old school friend. With quite substantial flashbacks to their past, the novel plays out the relationships among the three sets of characters, leading to a temporary suspension of the disabilities of femininity and of Untouchability in the domestic arena. The levelling of the hierarchies of gender and caste is made possible by the gradual release of sympathy and respect between Dina and the tailors, aided by Maneck acting as a moral catalyst. In the end personal kindness and sympathy fail as solutions, not because they are shown to be inadequate, but because the political chaos of the Emergency intervenes like an uncontrollable and irrational force to frustrate the personal quests for a *modus vivendi*.

Roy's *The God of Small Things*, published in 1997, begins with the return of her protagonist Rahel to her family home in 1993 at the age of thirty. A series of flashbacks circulate around the tragic events that had occurred twenty-three years earlier, which had shattered and dispersed her family, killing her mother's untouchable lover and her half-English cousin, exiling her mother from her family home, and sending her brother into permanent silence and obsessive cleanliness in the vain ritual of purging guilt and impurity. In 1969 the family had consisted of Mammachi, the matriarch, her sister-in-law Baby Kochamma, her divorced son Chacko, her also divorced daughter Ammu, and Ammu's twins, Rahel and Estha. When Rahel returns twenty-three years later to the decaying house, its only inhabitants are Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria, the servant, and Estha, her brother, who is locked into an invincible silence. They are the survivors of the cataclysm generated by the events of one night in 1969.

It was the night when the two intertwining narratives that make up the novel reach their tragic aporia through the deaths of Sophie Mol, Chacko's half-English daughter, and Velutha, Ammu's untouchable lover. Although the two deaths occur in two different incidents, they are connected because in each case a barrier that History had enshrined and deemed uncrossable had been breached. History, according to Roy, is more powerful than biology (309). The half-English Sophie Mol's death signifies the impossibility of her symbolic filiation to Chacko despite the fact of his biological paternity because of the asymmetrical dialectic that controls the relation between colonized peoples and Empire. Her death occurs on the way to the History House in the Heart of Darkness, which had once housed Ayemenem's version of Conrad's Kurtz, the indigenized paedophilic Kari Saipu. This is a house that colonized subjects can peep into but cannot enter, because of their inception into

epistemologies that have contributed to the shrouding of their history. Thus the Heart of Darkness no longer symbolizes the processes and limits in the formation of Western knowledge, but rather the erasure of the indigene's knowledge of his or her world. This historical problematic that would have confronted Rahel and Estha, who survive the journey to the History House, is superseded by the History that is in the making in the shape of the violence inflicted upon Velutha in the back verandah of the History House. The parallel event of the Anglicized Sophie Mol's drowning on the way to the History House indicates the novel's symbolic displacement of the dialectic with the West, which had hitherto controlled the postcolonial erotic imagination and sense of history, for an indigenous dialectic of power and subordination that is supported by native endogamous units.

Some ostensible similarities emerge between these two texts, which justify a closer study of their cultural politics and their assessment of the alliances between national and state politics, on the one hand, and established hierarchies, on the other. To start with, both texts are written from the margins, as both Mistry and Roy come from minority communities in the Indian subcontinent: Mistry is a member of the Parsi community, and Roy comes from the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. As members of marginal religious groups, they may have a lesser investment in the caste system, which is tied to Hinduism. However, minority religious groups are not necessarily immune to caste stratification. For instance, the Syrian Christians trace their ancestry to Brahmins converted by St Thomas the Apostle in the first century AD, which suggests that attachment to caste pedigree has survived in this community notwithstanding twenty centuries of Christianity. Roy's fiction demonstrates how the diverse doctrines of equality preached by Christianity and Marxism are insufficient for neutralizing the belief in the hereditary Untouchability of a segment of the population. Although Mistry's Parsi characters reject in principle social hierarchy based upon caste, they subscribe to the reiteration of similar hierarchies under different auspices. Strikingly, both authors have explored conjunctions between caste oppression and sexism through the portrayal of complex and intricate relationships between oppressed femininity and Untouchable men, in which women cross the barrier of pollution motivated by compassion or desire. In both novels, social hierarchy is signified through a series of tropes, which identify the subjection of women and Untouchables through their constructed proximity to the pollutions of the body. Both novels show fiction's appointment with History, either through history's active intervention in fiction, or through the use of the notion of History as a deterministic and unassailable force that confirms received patterns of ascendancy. The notion of *History* as an abstract overarching force that is distinguishable from the particular happenings of *history* emerges through direct reference in Roy's novel, and indirectly in Mistry's work through the way in which historical events reiterate the same power structure. To understand how the cultural politics that History has enshrined reproduces itself in the specific performances of history

and fiction in these novels, one must understand the logic that underpins the Hindu social hierarchy.

Polluting Bodies and the Hindu Social Hierarchy

By interlacing the fortunes of Untouchables and women, Mistry and Roy demonstrate that the weight of social pressure operates to confirm in each case their extreme subordination despite whatever personal effort may be applied towards upward mobility on the part of the Untouchable or towards autonomy on the part of the woman. The authors seem to be suggesting that the granting of the right to vote to women and Untouchables under the terms of constitutional democracy have not sufficed to nullify the spirit of the *Dharmashastras*, which, according to André Béteille, embodies “the legal order of traditional Hindu society.” Béteille describes the *Manusmriti* or Code of Manu, which “for two thousand years occupied a pre-eminent position among the *Dharmasastras*,” as having “debarred [Shudras and women] from most of the ordinary graces of life” (11). The Shudras, the servant caste, came over time to be dichotomized between “clean” and “unclean,” with the latter eventually being regarded as outcaste and untouchable. According to the *Manusmriti*, the Shudra’s relationship to his master is analogous to a woman’s relationship with the man with whom she has her primary relationship. A Shudra can never be released from servitude, even if his master has released him, because servitude is innate to him. Likewise a female must be subject in turn to her father and her husband and “‘when her lord is dead to her sons’” (Béteille 11). Just as a Shudra can never cease to be a servant, the female can never be independent. Severe as the disadvantages of the Shudras are, they pale in comparison to those of the Untouchables, who are invested with the stigma of absolute impurity, and suffer a corresponding level of degradation.

As Louis Dumont has shown, the social hierarchy that grades one caste above the other is constituted through an index of purity, with the Brahmin deemed the most pure, and the Untouchable regarded as the most impure (43-47).⁴ The Untouchables, who are outcastes, are distinguished from caste Hindus, who constitute the four castes or *varnas*. Of these the Brahmins make up the priestly caste; the Kshatriyas are kings and warriors; the Vaisyas are cultivators and traders; while the Shudras are the servants. The last-named caste is once-born in contradistinction to the other three castes that are twice-born and whom the once-born Shudras serve. The divisions in the four-fold

⁴ Declan Quigley, among other critics, has challenged facets of Dumont’s interpretation of caste. He believes that “on closer inspection the concept of the Brāhmans being supreme because of their superior purity is difficult to sustain....There is a widely belief that priesthood is a defiling activity” (33). Quigley makes particular reference to a category of Brāhmans called Mahābrāhmans, who perform funerary rituals, and who are regarded as defiled because of “the death pollution they take on themselves” (33). Dumont, on the other hand, perceives the Mahābrāhmans as “an Untouchable of a particular kind” (58).

classification that make up the primary castes are called *varna* in contrast to a secondary system of classification made up of *jatis*. Harold A. Gould differentiates thus between *varna* and *jati*:

Varna is the social field within which humans are compelled to strive for life-transcendence. *Jatis* are the social compartments through which humans pass in each birth in the course of their karmaically determined quest for *moksha*, or release from life. (Gould 17)

Life-transcendence or *moksha* is achieved through successive rebirths and depends on the “systematic reduction through time” of one’s entanglement with the polluting substances connected to embodiment. This is achieved through “Brahman-supervised rituals in one’s present life and upward-spiraling rebirth (*samsara*) over the long pull” (Gould 16). The body (*deha*) is seen in Indic religious systems as responsible for one’s engulfment in illusion (*maya*) and for one’s separation from the “formless [...] eternal” reality (Gould 15). Therefore release from the body constitutes the desired transcendence. In the span of mortal existence, however, one’s level of sublimation is marked by one’s caste — the higher one’s caste, the greater the purity and proximity to *moksha*. Since the body is the site of impurity, its products such as blood, gore, hair, sweat, semen, faeces, urine, and the rheum of the eyes are polluting, as are life and bodily processes, such as birth, suffering, death, deformation, and decay (Gould 15, Dundes 7).

Defilement can be either of a permanent or temporary kind. Temporary defilement can affect one when the organic processes enter social life through birth, death, or menstruation. It can be alleviated or remedied through ritual acts of purification, of which “the bath is the most widespread remedy” (Dumont 48). During such a time the afflicted person becomes untouchable, and according to Dumont, “Indians themselves identify this impurity with that of the Untouchables” (48). Defilement can also occur through contact with an Untouchable. Such defilement can be remedied, whereas if one is born an Untouchable, the pollution is regarded as innate and therefore irremediable (Dundes 11). Hence, while there is a difference between acquired and innate impurity with regard to the possibility for their alleviation, there is no conceptual difference with respect to the nature of the impurity that is sustained. Dumont provides support for regarding the impurity of the outcaste as similar to the impurity that is sustained by occasional life processes through references to the Laws of Manu, which lists both sorts of impurity in succession as if of the same class: “When he has touched a *Candāla*,⁵ a menstruating woman, an outcaste, a woman who has just given birth, a corpse [...] he purifies himself by bathing” (cited in Dumont 52).

Manu’s positioning of the menstruating woman and the woman after childbirth, next to the *Candāla*, the outcaste, and the corpse, may suggest that,

⁵ Krishan describes the *Candālas* as one of the original Untouchable tribal groups (Krishan 9).

irrespective of her natal caste, the female is exceptionally prone to defilement on account of her proximity to certain biological processes. Hence, a menstruating woman may not cook for her family, and should be in seclusion and dine alone for that period. The ban on communal dining placed upon her is not unlike the ban on inter-dining that pertains between the various endogamous hierarchical units that make up the caste system. In the case of women, their periodic lapses into temporary defilement, the sign of their fertilizable bodies, mark them also as sexual commodities, denied for that reason the privileges of agency and inheritance. Both Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance* and Ammu in *The God of Small Things* run the risk of being reduced to tradeable bodies. Thus the marks of female defilement are also the signifiers through which the sexual economy operates, while in the economy at large the notion of defilement contrives to produce a substantial class of people consigned to menial jobs for the benefit of those privileged by their purity. Through the concept of defilement, religion and the economy join hands to further the interests of those who can claim purity.

Indeed Hinduism may be perceived as not only permitting the social and economic exploitation of Untouchables as well as women, but also of mandating it, thus giving cruelty and heartlessness the aura of virtue. It is precisely this conflict between religion and benevolence that Dr B.R. Ambedkar alludes to in the following statement from his undelivered speech on the “Annihilation of Caste”:

Caste may be bad: Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be said that the Hindus observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious. (83)

Ambedkar was himself an Untouchable. Educated under the patronage and financial assistance of the Maharajas of Baroda and of Kolhapur at Elphinstone College, Bombay, and subsequently at Columbia University and the London School of Economics and Political Science, he emerged in the 1920s as a spokesman and champion of the cause of Untouchables. He represented their interests and that of other depressed groups in the First and Second Round Table Conferences in London in 1930-31 and 1932 respectively, when preliminary steps were taken towards formulating the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar was anxious to dissociate the interests of the Depressed Classes from those of the Hindu majority, whom he saw as the oppressors of the Untouchables. His solution to the problem of caste oppression was unequivocal. He enjoined upon the Hindu leaders for whom his above-mentioned undelivered address was intended “to tell the Hindus, that what is wrong with them is their religion — the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste” (84). Ambedkar's analysis rejects the notion of Socialists that “the economic motive is..the only motive by which man is actuated,” and he proposes that religion can operate as one of the sources of power as the Hindu example indicates (42). From Ambedkar's point of view, caste exploitation could not be satisfactorily uprooted without

annihilating the doctrinal authority upon which it is based. The response of Ambedkar's hosts was to revoke the invitation to him to speak, perhaps quailing before the glare of such a radical critique of the Hindu *status quo*.

The Indian political response to caste oppression has been largely predicated upon the secularism of the nation-state, expressed through various Constitutional measures directed towards the achievement of "casteless egalitarianism" (Bayly 244).⁶ Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolishes "Untouchability," forbids its practice in any form, and makes "the enforcement of any disability arising out of 'Untouchability' a punishable offence." Article 15 of the Constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of caste. The First Amendment to the Constitution permits the State to make special provisions "for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes." Article 341 of the Constitution "authorizes the President of India to specify 'castes, races, or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races, or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Castes'" (Hiro 7). In Dilip Hiro's Report produced for the Working Group on Untouchables, he argues that the law in itself is insufficient to uproot discrimination without the conscientious enforcement of legal provisions, and this is where the Constitutional safeguards have proven to be less than adequate. Mistry and Roy show a world where the liabilities of Untouchability prevail because, despite the Constitution, and the proclaimed class warfare of Marxist parties and other sorts of political rhetoric, established power entrenches itself by neutering the democratic process.

The Politics of Narration

Notwithstanding the bankruptcy of the secular solution, Mistry and Roy do not by any means suggest that the destruction of caste depends upon the rejection of the Hindu scriptures as Ambedkar had advocated. Hinduism may have written the rules of engagement, and authorized the social and economic order that followed, but were this authority to be withdrawn, it would not follow that the social and economic order that it had promoted would thereby collapse. In the end, despite its religious roots, the perpetuation of caste is supported by deep-seated economic and social interests, which would rather re-invent the discourse of discrimination to shroud their politics or use the law as their alibi than surrender their advantages.

⁶ In relation to the secularism of independent India, it should be noted that upon Independence the separate electorates for religious communities, which had been first established by the 1909 Morley-Minto Reforms and extended by the 1919 Government of India Act, was abolished, although "Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (and also women) were included in the new schemes of compensatory electoral weighting which reserved a proportion of state and central legislative assembly seats for representatives of these groups" (Bayly 272).

Mistry shows that the mutating discourses of power simply redefine the meaning of Untouchability. If the Untouchables of the village are the Chamars or leather workers, in the city, where caste affiliation dissolves in urban anonymity, the new “Untouchables” are the beggars or the pavement-dwellers, who dramatize through their situation the evolving dynamics of social ostracism. As Mistry’s Untouchable characters turn into beggars at the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the Untouchable and the beggar are different manifestations of the same condition. In each case through the appeal to some ideal principle, which creates also its antithesis, the abject of society is identified and exiled. The principle itself may change according to political exigencies and prevailing interests, but the fundamental structure of exclusion is the same. During the Emergency, “Beautification” of public amenities displaces “purity” as the desired ideal, which operates much as caste purity does in order to identify an expendable class.

Mistry installs in his fiction the state of Emergency as a vast behemoth under whose auspices all kinds of State and bureaucratic power spin into excess. The Emergency also provides the visible mantle under which traditional forms of power reiterate their hold upon village societies, for instance using its population policies to take away the reproductive capacities of Untouchables. In the city, under the Emergency, the stigma of defilement gets a new interpretation, as its urban Beautification programmes attempt to eliminate from view beggars and pavement-dwellers. These are the new visual equivalents of the Untouchables, and many of them may indeed, like Mistry’s characters, Ishvar and Omprakash, come from the Untouchable castes. In this mutation of the terms of oppression, the only thing that changes is the language of discrimination, not the fact of discrimination, its logic, or its targets.

In a powerful retrospective sequence that culminates in 1969, Mistry traces the processes leading up to the eventual displacement of Ishvar and Omprakash from their native village by the river. Narayan, Ishvar’s brother and Omprakash’s father, had challenged the corrupt electoral practices that effectively disenfranchised the Untouchable caste. For this, he and his friends were tortured to death by the local leader Thakur Dharamsi.⁷ Not satisfied with this, the Thakur ordered the torching of Narayan’s home and the murder of his family in a bid to root out the aspiration of Untouchables for democratic equality. This event, as well as the decline of the tailoring business in their provincial town, precipitate the migration of the two surviving members of the family, Ishvar and Omprakash, to the city by the sea, which is not identified but which one may deduce to be Bombay.

The fictional murder of a Chamar family in 1969 or 1970 has parallels with similar incidents that occurred in 1981 and recorded by M.J. Akbar in his book *Riot after Riot*:

⁷ Mistry uses “Thakur” as a title of honour. This title is particularly widespread among petty Rajput chieftains. This meaning of “Thakur” ought to be distinguished from its use to designate the members of a hill-tribe found in the hinterland of Bombay (See Chapekar 1).

In the autumn of 1981, Harijans⁸ were killed in several villages in Uttar Pradesh. Two of these massacres, one in Delhi, followed by another a few days later in Sarhupur — received widespread publicity. The killers, who were Thakur Rajputs, had just one message to send through murder — the untouchable Jatav cobblers had to learn their place in society and the caste hierarchy. (Akbar 45)

This is also the message that Mistry's Thakur Dharamsi wished to send to the Untouchable Chamar families who had sought democratic equality in defiance of caste hierarchy. What we see here is a conflict between the terms of nationhood and those of caste stratification, which have their roots in Hinduism. The casualty in the conflict is the principle of democracy upon which equality of citizenship depends.

Mistry's fictional and Akbar's documentary accounts of caste violence may be usefully situated within the broader context of "caste wars" that have dominated parts of Tamilnadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Bihar. Most of the violence against the Dalits (a term meaning "the oppressed," which is used by the erstwhile Untouchables in order to categorize themselves) comes from landowning caste Hindus, who are equipped with militias and private armies that have been recruited and trained with government assistance and cooperation, initially for the purpose of combating Maoist-style uprisings from tenants and landless people (Bayly 346). In actual fact, caste affinities and ties with the land became the unifying theme to which the armed groups appealed in order to unite landowners as well as peasants of superior birth against the government's agrarian reforms that were intended to favour Dalits. Their common cause against the Dalits was often expressed through caste warfare. As Susan Bayly points out, "according to government figures, there were 40,000 anti-Harijan 'atrocities' between 1966 and 1976, this being the period of Indira Gandhi's so-called 'decade of development'" (345). Bayly differentiates between these agrarian conflicts that have survived well into the 1990s from those during the colonial period when caste may also have been invoked by indicating an additional ingredient that is specific to the modern "caste wars": they threaten to invert "the ideals of the 'secular' nation-state." By defining the Dalit groups as constituting real or imaginary danger, "many of the victimisers [are able] to represent themselves both as victims and as embodiments of national virtue" (Bayly 352-53). The government's paradoxical role here in subverting its own programme of democratic reforms through its support for caste-based private armies has parallels with Mistry's depiction of how the arbitrary use of power by the government during the Emergency manages to undermine its stated aim of "introducing programmes of benefit for the common man and woman" (Mistry 327).

⁸ "Harijan," literally meaning "children of God," is the name devised by Mahatma Gandhi for the Untouchables.

Mistry goes so far as to use the Emergency as a symbolic vehicle to demonstrate government collusion and participation in the outright thuggery that confirms the continued disenfranchisement and displacement of depressed groups. His retrospective flashback to Narayan's murder by Thakur Dharamsi locates the excesses of the Emergency within a history in which the actual political process has continually eroded the constitutional and legal safeguards through which genuine democracy has to work. Whether it is power at the village level or at the national level, in each case the holders of power seek to perpetuate, and succeed in perpetuating, authoritarian forms of governance under the guise of democracy. But under the Emergency, even the pretence of democracy withers to expose the authoritarianism at the heart of Indian politics. In the unequivocal collapse of the government's moderating role is also contained the collapse of the "fine balance" that the title of Mistry's novel advertises, and which alludes to the balance between hope and despair, and presumably also between power and resistance. In its stead is the enormous drag exerted by established hierarchies, bent upon reproducing themselves no matter what.

Yet notwithstanding the inevitable knowledge provided by the author's hindsight, Mistry's narrative is interspersed with the personal hope of his Untouchable characters that the quest for individual freedom may triumph. One of these occasions of hope emerges in the rebellion against the mandates of caste by Dukhi, Ishvar and Narayan's father, when he decides to apprentice his sons to be tailors. That Dukhi gets away with it may be a result of contemporary caste politics. This was in 1939, the end of the decade in which the Poona Pact was signed among Hindu leaders promising the end of the discrimination against Untouchables (Hiro 6). By using the name "Dukhi," it is quite possible that Mistry is invoking a literary genealogy for his depiction of Untouchability, besides situating the aspirations and efforts of his Untouchable characters within a history in which their defeat is pre-determined. Significantly, "Dukhi" is the name of the Untouchable protagonist in a short story *Sadgati (Deliverance)* by the Hindi novelist Premchand, which was made into a film by Satyajit Ray. In an essay written in 1982 and included in his book *Riot after Riot*, M.J. Akbar demonstrates art's likeness to life as he juxtaposes sequences from Ray's just released film with scenes from the massacre of Untouchables living outside Sarhupur on 31 December 1981 (61-76). Ray's and Premchand's Dukhi dies from the combined effects of starvation and hard labour upon an already weak and debilitated body. In contrast, Mistry's Dukhi is made of a more robust constitution; he survives the privations of his position and turns his disillusionment towards a constructive purpose, the release of his sons from the occupational stigma of being leather workers. But a generation or two later, Dukhi's efforts culminate in the massacre of all of his descendants, except for a son and a grandson, who eventually slide into beggary as a result of the government-sponsored mutilation of their bodies during the Emergency. Through the possible intertextual references, Mistry demonstrates, like Akbar, that nothing has changed despite the rhetoric and the occasional examples of upward mobility.

If, on the one hand, Mistry sets up parallels between the oppressive policies of the Emergency and those of the caste system, on the other hand, he demonstrates the similitude between its draconian measures and those of the fascist state. The slum dwellers, whose homes are razed to the ground by the Beautification brigade, are corralled into trucks, which deliver them to construction sites as free labour. Mistry invokes here shades of slavery as well as of the Jewish holocaust. The parallel with slavery is reinforced when Ishvar and Omprakash, who had been forcibly transported from their hutments despite being employed, have to buy their freedom by indenturing themselves to the city's Beggarmaster. But their transportation to the construction site, which functions as a concentration camp, alludes to the more covert wish to eliminate the people whose unaccommodated presence mars the city's beauty. Nusswan, Dina Dalal's wealthy but obtuse brother, gives voice to the idea of a final solution. He suggests that the two hundred million who are "surplus to requirements" may be eliminated through "a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is cost-effective" (458). In the end, the project for genocide occurs through more subtle methods when Ishvar and Omprakash are forced to undergo botched vasectomies that leave one crippled and the other castrated. The holocaust of the Untouchables is managed under masquerades that disguise its deadly intent.⁹

Given the cynical appropriation of the democratic process and the blatant disregard for doctrines of equality, Mistry's fiction retreats from the sphere of public struggle and looks for solutions that operate through domestic and familial metaphors. In diametric contrast to the final solution proposed by his character Nusswan, Mistry puts forward a symbolic project for the accommodation of the displaced. In Mistry's novel, the politics of caste and the politics of gender converge in the precarious entitlement of both the Untouchable tailors and Dina Dalal to a dwelling place of their own. On their arrival in the city, the tailors are permitted grudgingly to sleep on the back pavement of someone's shop. After finding employment with Dina, they are encouraged by their host to rent a hut in the slums, only to be evicted by the Emergency's slum clearance programme. On buying their liberty, aware of the danger of sleeping in public places, they gladly accept the sanctuary that Dina offers reluctantly in her cramped flat. The picaresque style of the novel, which characterizes its forward trajectory, is largely motivated by the tailors' quest for a home of their own. Dina, on the other hand, lives in fear of eviction on some real or trumped-up excuse, since her rent-controlled flat represents potentially valuable real estate for her landlord. The flat is the symbol of her independence. She is able to retain both only so long as she has the income from her tailoring business. Hence, Dina and the tailors are mutually dependent on each other. She needs their skill, and they need the shelter that

⁹ See Arundhati Roy's *The Cost of Living*, in which, like Mistry, she draws a parallel between India's calculated but unacknowledged displacement of millions of people and the policies of the Third Reich: "True, they're not being annihilated or taken to gas chambers, but I can warrant that the quality of their accommodation is worse than in any concentration camp of the Third Reich. They're not captive, but they redefine the meaning of liberty" (23).

she provides. Mistry, however, raises this co-dependence beyond the level of crude economic exchange, when the foursome consisting of the tailors, Dina, and Maneck Kohlah locate their relationship within the paradigm of the reconstructed family. This experimental symbolic family is based upon the erasure of gender inequality as well as caste inequality. Through the projected wedding of Omprakash, this family looks forward to its perpetuation. However, Omprakash's castration and Dina's eventual eviction from her flat indicate the defeat of Mistry's tentative proposal of accommodation for women and Untouchables. In the final analysis, the political force of Mistry's fiction lies not in the survival of his solutions, but upon the epic magnitude he invokes in order to demonstrate the effectively invincible and protean qualities of traditional power, as well as upon the moral indignation that he summons against such power.

Like the intractable structural stasis that underlies the picaresque mode of Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, an unshakeable historical determinism controls Roy's novel. At the outset of her work, Roy stretches through time to isolate the Laws delivered by History, which determine social and sexual interaction, as well as her narrative resolution. She describes these Laws as being older than the European colonization of India, older than the inter-rite conflicts between the Portuguese missionaries and the Syrian-Christian church, and older even than the Christianization of Kerala in the first century AD (33). Roy is, of course, referring to the Laws of Manu upon which is based the caste system, which organizes society into endogamous units, rendering as outcaste anyone who defies its rules of sexual contact. These Laws have derived their authority and inviolability through the sheer weight of History. Roy suggests that the automatism of the historical process works through the police and Marxist politicians, who are the agents of the caste system despite their ostensible affiliations.

Since 1957, when E.M.S. Namboodiripad took office as the first Marxist Chief Minister of Kerala, the Communist Party has been in and out of Government. Namboodiripad's first term in office ended two years later with the collapse of his Government. In 1967, he was returned for a second term as Chief Minister, heading a coalition government made up of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), of which he was the leader, and the Communist Party of India. This coalition lasted till October 1969 (Devi 332). Hence, in December 1969, Namboodiripad was no longer the Chief Minister, when he "went on with the business of harnessing of anger for parliamentary purposes" (Roy, *God of Small Things* 69), resulting in the march in Cochin, in which Velutha had participated. Roy couples Namboodiripad's opportunism with the duplicity of her fictional local Communist Party leader Comrade K.N.M. Pillai, who abandons Velutha to caste vengeance, by showing Pillai garlanding Namboodiripad in a photograph that holds pride of place in Pillai's living room (269). By thus splicing history and fiction, Roy mounts her critique of caste discrimination alongside her critique of Marxist hypocrisy, which facilely identifies caste with class. Indeed by alluding to the Brahmin Namboodiripad as the "high priest of Marxism in Kerala" (67), she

foregrounds the contradiction between Namboodiripad's membership of the caste aristocracy that had traditionally oppressed and enslaved Untouchables and people of low caste, and his leadership of a party that is supposed to advance the cause of the proletariat.

In an ironic twist, Roy not only shows the historical determinism of Marx with its promised triumph of the proletariat, being superseded by another sort of historical determinism that assures the re-consolidation of caste discrimination, but she also demonstrates Marxist collusion in the latter event. Despite the Marxist slogan "Caste is Class, comrades" (281), and despite some overlaps between class and caste stratification, the two concepts derive from different principles. Accordingly, the pursuit of class warfare provides no necessary resistance to caste stratification, thus enabling the History that has written and sanctified the Love Laws to triumph over the Marxist interpretation of history. It also triumphs over narrative teleology, controlling the trajectory and resolution of desire.

History as an abstract force may be construed as belonging to the sphere of the Big God, whose realm includes the violent, relentless, chaotic, monumental train of events that make up the "public turmoil of a nation" (19). Against the Big God, whose legitimacy is undeniable because size and publicity are in his favour, Roy juxtaposes the Small God, the God of Small Things, to whose domain belongs the contained world of personal desire. And personal desire is necessarily inconsequential because it fails the test of scale. In the cataclysms, devastations, destruction, and violence that beset India, the personal tragedy is buried, beneath the weight of more potent sorrows. Thus fiction, which privileges personal emotion, is an indulgence that History ignores in its majestic sweep through time, unless, of course, fiction interrupts History's progress. Roy does precisely this. Instead of an apology for indulging in fiction's cosy privations, she uses fiction to interrupt and interrogate History's progress. She throws in its path the mutually reciprocal, consummated desire between an upper caste Syrian Christian divorcée, the mother of two children, and an Untouchable man, three years younger than her, who is the beneficiary of her family's patronage.

Inevitably History is arrested, perhaps only momentarily, until it can dispose of the challenge to its laws and the logic governing them. Certainly, the rules of sexual contact had been transgressed through inter-caste sexual consummation, but simultaneously a bid is made for the sexual liberation of the woman as she dispenses with the compulsory chastity demanded by her divorce and the suspension of agency required by the commodity status ascribed to her body. Rather than being given into a sexual union, she gives herself to the man. But as if these were not enough, Roy interposes the claims of biology against the dominion of History, for the urgencies of the body alone can account for the sexual union of Velutha and Ammu, since neither economic nor social advantage for either can explain it. Further, at the conclusion of her novel, Roy displaces the fantasy of disembodiment that History has entrenched, and enshrines in its place the sublimity that resides in the erotic motion of bodies.

Despite all this, History wins because it has the power and the weapons to destroy bodies and souls. Roy declares the God of Small Things to be also “the God of Loss” (312). Velutha is bludgeoned to death by the policemen, the henchmen of History, putatively for the supposed rape of Ammu and for the supposed abduction of her children and their cousin, but in reality for transgressing the caste barrier. Ammu is ostracized by her family. The sexual agency that she had asserted so daringly is bereft of any public signifiers as she is equated with the shamed and commodified body of the public woman. At the Kottayam police station, Inspector Thomas Mathew taps his baton against her breast, implying that she is a *veshya* (prostitute) (8, 260). If fictional plots must be subordinated to the sorts of closures warranted by History, they can nevertheless insinuate into the sphere of representation the lyricism of Small Things, which History disregards or represses. Hence, in tracing the gentle nuances of the desire of Velutha and Ammu for each other, fiction rejects its allegiance to History, and joins hands with poetry to give voice to the subtle, delicate impulses of passion. Thus the God of Small Things snatches a kind of victory in defeat.

Roy's argument with History occurs not only through the subtextual dialectic between fiction and History in *The God of Small Things*, but also in the debate that she introduces about the sort of History that ought to be privileged. The story of Velutha and Ammu is governed by historical determinants that have their roots in the *Dharmasatras*; this story about the transgression of native hierarchies displaces the privileged dialectic derived from the history of European colonization. The shift from one historical consciousness to another occurs through the companion plot to Velutha and Ammu's story. In this plot, Ammu's twins, Estha and Rahel, along with their English cousin, Sophie Mol, try to cross the Meenachal River in full flood in order to reach the History House in the Heart of Darkness. Sophie Mol drowns, but the twins reach their destination where they come upon the brutalized body of Velutha on the back verandah of the History House.

Unlike Conrad's essentially linear upriver progress towards the horrors implicating European colonization, which he unveils fleetingly and allusively, Roy's method is to move in a series of circular stabs that yield graduated disclosures of the cumulative darkness of heart that underpins the indigenous hierarchy. If Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* serves as a pre-text to the horrors of the colonial condition, Roy rolls back history to reveal a deeper and an older exploitation to which European colonization is a footnote. As she explains it, her narrative “really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The Laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much” (33). In contrast to Conrad's riverine journey up the Congo to the interior, which delivers the undreamt horror of the colonial encounter, the twins as well as their mother, in their different journeys, *cross* the river — they go *Akkara*, to the Other Shore — and discover the indigenous parallel to colonial exploitation. Their journeys undermine the singular dialectic that has so far maintained postcolonial history and theory.

The combined outcome of Mistry's and Roy's fictions is to show the continuity of native structures of oppression that are immune to or appropriative of both democratic and Marxist models of social, political, and economic reform. Confronted with the impotence of political and legislative solutions, and the intractability of oppressive structures, both Mistry and Roy turn to the small things on the human scale as providing the places where the human spirit is tested and where it occasionally triumphs through sheer endurance, where inequalities are born and where they may be extinguished, and where humanity's grand pretensions finally terminate. For both authors, the fantasy of power and the paranoia that sustains it begin in the problematic relationship with the body, which provides the site and the tropes for encoding domination. For both, the refigured relationship with the body that culminates in the valorization of the material dimension provides support for the vision of a new ethical order. Insofar as this vision is forcibly amputated from a coherent praxis in both novels, both have to confront the impasse of either despair or neurosis on the way to their resolutions.

Refiguring the Body

Like most religious systems, Hinduism has its specific answer for the anxieties that spring from the encounter with the uncontrollable processes of the body. Whereas Christianity's solutions are found in the doctrines of divine incarnation and the resurrection of the body, which contrive to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the material, Hinduism has recourse to the fantasy of hereditary purity, which justifies the erection of notional barriers to protect the self from the body's defilements. This problematic and paradoxical relationship with the body is reiterated in the social sphere through the projective mechanisms whereby the body's uncleanness is transferred to the alienated and despised other, who is thereby classified as "untouchable." Insofar as biology makes some of its most spectacular and fundamental intrusions upon the social sphere through the female body, it too must be hedged with caution and contained. The fantasy of disembodiment that drives the subjection of Untouchables and women also confers on them the opposite condition of being the bearers of a demeaning embodiment. Hence, their abject status is signalled through a variety of codes written upon the body. In demonstrating this, Mistry and Roy confirm the paranoid rejection of the body that lies at the base of both caste and gender hierarchies. In Mistry's case, the response to the paranoia is to propose what in another context Terry Eagleton calls "a materialist morality." Eagleton perceives such a morality as having its genesis in the circumstances that control material existence (35).¹⁰ Roy, on the other hand, reverses the abject status of the body through the celebration of a materialist eroticism. For Mistry and Roy, it is through our material

¹⁰ Eagleton's essay, which appeared in *The Guardian Review*, is an edited extract from his book *After Theory*, published on 25 September 2003 by Allen Lane.

vulnerabilities and through the ecstasies of the body that we are able to intuit the human condition upon which all ethical action is predicated.

Mistry's novel makes it abundantly clear through a variety of codes that social dominion has its source in the oppressive subjection of the body of the other. Repeatedly, the postulated defilement of the Untouchables serves as the pretext for various landowners to visit upon them with impunity all sorts of brutalities. In one instance, after a day of back-breaking labour, pounding chillies for Thakur Premji, the upper-caste landowner, Dukhi, Ishvar's father, is beaten and his wages confiscated because the mortar used for pounding had split in two. In another instance, the young Ishvar and his brother Narayan, who are excluded from school under caste regulations, endure physical punishment for stealing into the classroom, when no one is around, to satisfy their curiosity. Fascinatedly experimenting with chalks and slates, Ishvar makes the discovery that it is easy to make his mark before it is contradicted by the physical blows that rain upon his and Narayan's bodies when the schoolmaster finds them in the classroom (134-35). By this time, Ishvar already bore on his face, like a caste mark, the scar that he had sustained on the day of his initiation into his hereditary occupation as a leather worker. Helping to shift a dying buffalo from the field of an upper-caste landlord, he is gored on the face by the buffalo.

Mistry foregrounds the false schism upon which the notional alienation from the body is predicated when the upper-caste Pandit Lalluram belches, breaks wind, and blows his nose, as he pontificates upon the defiling touch of Ishvar and Narayan in the schoolroom. Although the sovereignty over the body that the Pandit aspires to is evidently beyond his reach, what is amply within his grasp is its ritual expression through the power exerted over Untouchable bodies. However, as Mistry proves, this is no disinterested quest for ritual purity since it also legitimizes and perpetuates an oppressive economic and social order.

Similarly, gender hierarchy is asserted through the degradation and humiliation of female bodies. In a scene from Dina's pubescent years, we are shown how her loss of agency to her brother Nusswan coincides with his hatred for and violence towards her burgeoning sexuality. With the death of their father, Nusswan becomes the figure of authority in their home, controlling even minor details of Dina's apparel and appearance. On one occasion when Dina defies Nusswan and cuts her hair, he chastises her for this exercise of autonomy by taping her severed plaits back to her head. He regards the severed hair as polluted. By forcing Dina to wear them, he not only revokes the autonomy she has exercised, but he is also bent upon constructing her body as degraded. Nusswan's action links the fertilizable female body with pollution.

Like the Untouchable who carries with him the liability of the contaminating touch, Dina carries with her the reminder of the pollution that is linked to her fertilizable body through the stock of sanitary pads that she has devised from the remnants of fabric. As Dina gradually crosses the pollution barrier between herself and the tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, by dispensing

with segregated cups, by dining together, and by massaging Omprakash's strained back, a reciprocal levelling of the gender hierarchy occurs. It is signified through Maneck and Omprakash turning Dina's sanitary pads into phallic symbols, which they attach to themselves, as they cavort around her room in an exuberant burst of masculine bonding during her absence. Yet this inclination towards symbolic equality between male and female bodies runs the risk of being torpedoed when Omprakash proposes to Maneck that they should satisfy their sexual voyeurism by peeping on Dina in the bathroom. This attempt to install the male gaze disintegrates as Maneck rises to the defence of Dina's honour. Since Maneck does not refrain from indulging his voyeuristic instincts with Omprakash on another occasion in another location where their object is an unknown woman, it must be assumed that the gender hierarchy is in abeyance only provisionally. Yet it is levelled sufficiently for Dina to contemplate accommodating the tailors on a permanent basis, and receiving into her household Omprakash's prospective wife.

What motivates Dina is the surge of sympathy that she feels on being confronted with the visible suffering of Ishvar and Omprakash. They, in their turn, are moved by her recognition of their humanity. Mistry suggests that ultimately this human bond needs to be acknowledged through the practical accommodation of the other, which is to be distinguished from the dues that pity and guilt yield to beggars. Beggarmaster's public mourning for his unacknowledged, belatedly discovered half-brother, the beggar Shankar, privileges the perception of human fraternity, which facilitates the accommodation of the other, over the random, and sometimes impersonal, philanthropy extended to beggars. Mistry's vision terminates in a practical ethics that is ultimately incompatible with the values and politics that support hierarchies. Given the invincibility of these hierarchies, the trajectory of his fiction recognizes the divide between his vision and its effective realization. Perhaps this pessimism is reiterated and compounded in the suicide of Maneck in 1984 after he discovers about the circumstances leading to the beggary of Ishvar and Omprakash. But Mistry balances this despair with the practical assistance that Dina continues to render to Ishvar and Omprakash, despite her reduced circumstances at the end of the novel. Bereft of all sense of balance in the public arena, a fine balance still survives in the sorts of personal responses that suffering may elicit.

Instead of dramatizing as Mistry has done the privations inflicted upon the Untouchable body, Roy offers a local history of the strategies for segregating and marking Untouchable bodies. Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, is described as an "Old World Paravan" (76) who had to crawl backwards, sweeping away his footprints "so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint" (74). Far from resenting this indignity, or perceiving its socially constructed origin, Vellya Paapen is so grateful for the small crumbs that his oppressors throw in his direction that he regards them as his benefactors. Literally and figuratively, he owes his vision to them since his supposed benefactors, Ammu's family, have paid for his glass eye. Velutha's older brother, Kuttapen, is paralysed

after falling from a coconut tree, his bodily immobility perhaps signifying his ideological, social, and occupational immobility. In contrast, Velutha crosses the occupational barrier on the strength of his talents as an inventive carpenter and handyman. This seeming instance of meritocratic progression must be qualified by the fact that it occurs in the context of self-interested patronage. And this patronage has its limits, since it sees a Paravan as excluded from the ranks of the professional class: "Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that only if he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer" (75).

However, unlike Mistry, who remedies the demeaning embodiment of his Untouchable characters by privileging their subjectivities, Roy throws a veil upon what Velutha really thinks. Of Velutha's time away from Ayemenem, of his precise political beliefs beyond the fact that he is a member of the Communist party, and of his thoughts about the people around him, nothing is known.¹¹ Roy transforms him into a symbol of the sacrifice that is exerted in the name of caste purity. He pays with his bloody, brutalized body for the ecstasy of consummated desire. The victim's nearly moribund body and the lover's shuddering orgasmic body, scaling the unaffordable heights of pleasure, enjoy a twinning through Velutha. Indeed when the twins, Estha and Rahel, come upon Velutha's mutilated body, they identify it as belonging to his twin Urumban (311). The substitutive relationship between the victim's body and the lover's body offers two mutually exclusive perspectives upon embodiment. The sacrificed body is the loathed body of the Untouchable, displaying by chance through his red-painted fingernails also the signifiers of despised femininity. Behind this sacrifice stands the rejection of embodiment itself. Its alternative is the celebration of the body's riches and pleasures, of life itself, which presents itself as the answer to the anxiety of embodiment.

According to Roy, Estha holds the receipt for Velutha's sacrifice. It is he, of the twins, who is chosen to go into the cell and falsely identify Velutha as their abductor so that his injuries can be justified after the fact. Estha does this, believing what Baby Kochamma had told him, that he would be saving Ammu from going to jail for his and Rahel's transgressions. In reality, he is the victim of Baby Kochamma's fabrications. She manipulates him into making a false testimony, so that it could be used by the police to exonerate her from the charge of having made a false report against Velutha. Thus Estha is incepted into the spiralling logic of a sacrificial order. He holds the receipts that acknowledge the foundational sacrifice of the body, upon which

¹¹ Tabish Khair makes a similar point when he says, "the caste system as it exists in India appears only by proxy in the novel" (143). However, I do not agree with Khair that Roy's politics or aesthetics is necessarily deficient on that account. He also dismisses Mistry's depictions of caste oppression because they are "static images" derived from "expressions of a textualized Bahminical 'ideal,'" which obscure contemporary "cultural and economic hegemonies." Although Khair acknowledges Mistry's perception of these hegemonies in the "'Emergency' sections," he prefers to glide over them, arguing that Mistry's "individualised and reduced notion of resistance" in *A Fine Balance* can only lead to "a repetition of oppression" (144).

all the subsequent false and fatal exchanges are enacted, and he indicates as much by erecting a barrier against his own body through his obsessive washing rituals.

Rahel, on the other hand, represents the alternative possibility of the body's invincibility through its biological reincarnations: "At first glance she appeared to have grown into the skin of her mother" (92). And Estha, seeing "their mother's beautiful mouth" reproduced in Rahel, tentatively touches and kisses that mouth (327). In their subsequent coupling, the substitutive logic of sacrifice is displaced for the embrace, which does not divide "Sex from Love," "Needs from Feelings" (328), nor the self from the body.

Like Mistry's finely calibrated balance, which neutralizes despair, and upon which his novel terminates, Roy offers a tentative answer to neurosis in the daring embrace of the body through the equally daring metaphor of sibling incest. And indeed the metaphor of incest is not inappropriate since what is proposed is the healing of the estrangement of the most intimate of relationships, that of the self and the body. In the end, both Mistry and Roy subscribe to an inclusive ethics, one describing it through the metaphor of the developing of familial links and the other through the healing of fundamental cleavages.

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