Intertextuality and the Postcolonial Writer: An Analysis of Shashi Deshpande's and Arundhati Roy's Fiction

In his book *Intertextuality* Graham Allen writes that the text is not an individual, isolated object, but a compilation of cultural textuality (36). By implication, all cultures and thus the world itself becomes a text. All discourses, therefore, are interpretations of the world, and as Bakhtin puts it, "responses and calls to other discourses" (53). The world itself is a text, and the words that make up the text are always already permeated with traces of other words, other uses. The sense of interconnectedness between different cultures is particularly significant in the postcolonial context, a context which arises due to the meeting of cultures. One may recall here how a creative writer like Raja Rao in the Preface to his *Kanthapura* writes of the difficulty in conveying the native rhythms of one's own land or language in a language that is not one's own. Similarly, Meenakshi Mukherjee has labelled Indian fiction in English as "Twice-Born Fiction," as it is fiction which has its roots in at least two cultures. In the jet-setting world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there are many whose lives straddle two or more continents: they are born in one culture, educated in another, and may work in yet another. The phenomenon becomes more glaring in the case of women writers who migrate from place to place, for familial as well as educational or vocational purposes. Hence it comes as no surprise that the works of Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy, two significant Indian writers from recent times, are replete with intertextual motifs.

Intertextuality as a device in literary texts can be deployed at different levels; passing references to other texts or events may colour the textual context in hand; extended and repeated references can bring in the other text as motif or symbol; or its pervasive presence in the main text's background can produce myriad implications. Intertextuality would perhaps be easier to comprehend if its sources were from a single culture with a homogeneous interpretative community. It becomes much more complex if the sources are cross-cultural, but such a phenomenon is quite common in today's global village. The resonances of cross-cultural intertextuality are perhaps greater in postcolonial societies in a liminal space — neither fully traditional nor fully modern — as in the case of present-day India. Both Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy have had migratory experiences within the Indian subcontinent, which is itself a mosaic of multiple cultures, even before their careers as writers took off. Thereafter, they have also had many intercultural and multicultural contacts. These experiences find expression in their fictional works which literally resonate with intertextuality, both intra-cultural and cross-cultural, drawing from both Eastern and Western sources, dramatising simultaneously the dialectic of the old and the new. One may here refer to "the stereographic plurality of the weave of signifiers in the text's tissue" (Barthes 159). As he points out, the text not only sets going a plurality of meanings; it is also woven out of numerous discourses and spun from already existing meaning. It is interesting to note that Deshpande and Roy manipulate various texts and discourses to achieve radically different effects of intertextuality: while Shashi Deshpande uses intertextual references to dramatise the clash between tradition and modernity without negating the latter, Arundhati Roy chooses to use them to create a world view of decadence along with a nostalgia for the old way of life. An analysis of Shashi's Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is attempted in the following pages.

Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* is a narrative with shifting viewpoints which ultimately suggest an optimistic outlook, though the characters and themes do have a brooding slant. *A Matter of Time* dramatises the clash between tradition and modernity by telling and (re)telling stories, (histories and (her)stories. Deshpande creates a dense intertext through repetitions with variations which are suggestive of the multiplicity of life itself. The narration in *A Matter of Time* is not straightforward and involves multiple perspectives, many shifts in time and place, and is very akin to the stream of consciousness technique. The narrative focus moves from Sumi to Gopal, from Sumi to Aru, with Kalyani and Goda's voices featuring in between as "twin troubadours" (118), singing the (folk) history of the family, or as
grandmothers narrating twilight stories to the grandchildren. The effect is one of point-counterpoint initially, but as the novel gathers force, a polyphony of voices — mostly female — emerges, and all of these are engaged in trying to understand the family (hi)story with an unusual emphasis on tracing the female line over more than four generations. A genealogy of women (virtually in the Foucauldian sense) is established in the novel, tracing "the complex course of descent" with an emphasis on "the exteriority of accidents" that shape human life. The author employs varied sources, both Indian and Western, in doing so. As a result, some of them attain the status of history and myth, through an admixture of fact and fiction, while the others create a pervading sense of intertextuality.

**History in A Matter of Time** is a consciously constructed intertext wherein family (histories are re-written imaginatively. Gopal, the historian-protagonist, himself re-imagines several versions of his parents' death (42), the viewpoints about which range from sin to benevolence to pity, and attempts to link them up with popular mythical figures from the *Ramayana*, or with literary figures from *Hamlet* (42-43). Such re-writing of family history is once again evident in the family document Kalyani gives to Gopal once she knows he has a special interest in Maratha history. Indeed, in this context, the author, through the eyes of Gopal, presents to us an extended reflection on the meaning of history and its links with myth and legend building that are perhaps inevitable in a land of many oral traditions like India. While the basic facts are clear in the document, the "inconsistencies" in the (hi)story in terms of local and caste affiliations make Gopal acutely aware of the subjectivity inherent in any history and of the erasures of women's histories herein. Ironically, however, it is the women troubadours Kalyani and Goda who preserve the family history and not the "sons" who reputedly perpetuate familial names in a patriarchal society. Evidently, every (hi) story can have many versions, some of them unspoken.

Besides the multiple (hi) stories that abound in *A Matter of Time*, there are a number of intertextual references to stories from various cultures, and some of them get told and retold emphasising the "myriad selves" that inhabit all our beings. Indeed, such a multiplicity of histories, stories and selves in *A Matter of Time* prompts the reader to see life as an intertextual pastiche with an emphasis on the accidental nature of events that become important determining factors in our life as in Gopal's reflections on the "accidents" that contributed to the making of his childhood and marriage, to his and Sumi's family histories (65-69). Similarly, Sumi's ruminations on the silences in her parents' lives that have entered her bones (74-75) tend to make her recall Dickens's dictum in *David Copperfield*: "In our children, my dear Copperfield, we live again" (75).

*A Matter of Time* is also permeated by the interpenetration of stories/texts with one another so that the shadow of one story merges with another to produce yet another story, creating a cross-cultural intertext which enriches our experience of reading the text. For instance, the Cinderella fairy tale gets rejected as a possible lens through which Sumi's daughters could be viewed (32-33). Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* and the fate of the eponymous heroine are evoked as is the legend about Kisa Gautami and the Buddha from the *Jataka Tales*. The romantic tales of Shakuntala and Dushyantha and of Romeo and Juliet become mirrors in which the breakdown of the Sumi-Gopal marriage is viewed. One also finds references to stories from the *Mahabharata* as in *thijakshaprasna* episode (133-34), or the birth of Krishna (71). Here again, the birth of Krishna is linked to the birth in Bethlehem, and to the celebrations for a grandson's birth in the novel.

One cannot but comment on the feminist/woman-centred slant given to the telling/re-telling of many stories in *A Matter of Time*. For instance, in celebrating the grandson's birth referred to earlier, "the male child belongs"; implicitly, the female does not, a slant which emphasizes the alienation Sumi feels in her natal home after her marriage to Gopal breaks down. Similarly, there is the play that Sumi writes for her students' dramatic society: it is actually a children's tale that Goda-mavshi had told a young Sumi to persuade her of the virtues of eating rice and curds, a story about a princess, who ate rice and curds everyday. And the tree that grew in their backyard where she washed her hands after every meal... And her declaration that she would marry the man who could identify the tree. All the suitors failing, except one. And that one, the palace gardener's son... (156)

Sumi finds many morals in it: "... the importance given to a tree, to the identification of it ... the dismissal of the aristocracy, the triumph of the common working man ..."(156), and she then thinks of the queer condition imposed by the princess. She wonders if the princess had adopted "subversive tactics" to gain her own ends: perhaps she had fallen in love with the gardener's son and used this clever stratagem to overcome her father's opposition to the "unsuitable match" and fulfil her own desires. That the struggle for power between the sexes is continual is again brought home to us,
through the comments on fairy-tale endings where lovers get married and live happily ever afterwards:

... Yes, what happens when the gardener's son gets power and becomes the king? He shuts his wife out of that power, of course; that's inevitable. But will she be able to find a weapon against him as she did against her father? A weapon which will not destroy herself as well? (158)

In the process of reflecting on this tale, Sumi also ruminates on Dasharath's promise to Kaikeyi in the Ramayana, again with a woman-centred slant which shifts the blame for the tragedy to Dasharath rather than the much-maligned stepmother Kaikeyi:

... no woman would fall into the trap of honouring one's word, of giving a blank post-dated cheque. Would Kaushalya have sent her son Rama into exile because some time, long ago, she had promised a man she would give him any boon he asked for? ... No, Kaushalya would have never made such a promise.... (157)

Yet another story that gets retold with a feminist slant is that of Surpanakha, who enamoured of Rama and Lakshmana, approaches them only to be mocked, ridiculed and mutilated. A modern parallel to the mythical Surpanakha is hinted at in Sumi's friend Vani who articulates the forbidden, what cannot be said by a "decent girl from a respectable family": that she misses her husband who is abroad, "specially at night."

Sumi plans to present Surpanakha from this unusual point of view:

Female sexuality. We're ashamed of owning it; we can't speak of it, not even to our own selves. But Surpanakha was not, she spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Surpanakha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it — it is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about. (191)

Shashi Deshpande's A Matter of Time thus creates a women's genealogy of sorts through a re-creation of the family (hi) story or text. She emphasises the role of women which has been effaced earlier in all documents. A virtual polyphony/multiplicity of histories, stories, and selves emerge through the many voices that people the novel. Fact and fiction mingle to produce a complex intertext having a basically optimistic outlook, that acceptance is all, perhaps in the vein of Lear's "Ripeness is all."

There are several comments in The God of Small Things that suggest Roy makes intertextuality a conscious motif and device as, for instance, the remark made on the twins in the context of the Kathakali performance: "Trapped in the bog of a story that was and wasn't theirs. That had set out with the semblance of structure and order, then bolted like a frightened horse into anarchy" (236). Similarly, a rewriting of texts is suggested in the description of the twins as "Hansel and Gretel in a ghastly tale in which their dreams would be captured and re-dreamed" (293). Roy makes extended references to texts as different as the popular film The Sound of Music (105-11), Heart of Darkness (125-26,199-200,305-06), Chemmeen (218-20), the Kathakali man and his 'Great' texts like Kama Shabadam (218-20) and Duryodhana Vadham (229, 234). Many passing allusions are made to texts as disparate as popular soap operas like WWF's "Hulk Hogan and Mr.Perfect" (28), Shakespeare's The Tempest, The Jungle Book, The Adventures of Susie Squirrel (58-59), Sinbad the Sailor (80), Julius Caesar (82-83), Ulysses and Penelope (157), the fairy tales about the Three Bears (180) or the Ugly Toad who turns into a handsome prince, Rumpelstiltskin (182), Hansel and Gretel, and even literary texts like The Tale of Two Cities (61), The Scarlet Pimpernel (182) and so on (187), a recipe for making jam (195), and the boatsongs of Kerala (196-97). The contexts in which these texts are used are, in general, negative or pessimistic.

One of the glaring instances wherein intertextuality is consciously evoked is in the context of Sophie Mol's visit to India. Sophie Mol is the half-English, half-Malayali cousin of Ammu's twins Rahel and Estha, and her imminent visit to Kerala exposes the twins to the Anglophilic mania of their aunt during the "What will Sophie Mol Think?" week (36). The extent to which the children are cowed down by Baby Kochamma is evident in the litany of questions that arises in the minds of "certain two-egg twin members audience in Abhilash Talkies" and the constant refrain is weighted in favour of the half English child Sophie Mol (106-07). The Oxford-educated Chacko too freely admits the family's Anglophilia to the twins (52).

Another instance of intertextuality arises in Sophie Mol's words when the children run away together to History House. Her words are so akin to Tom Sawyer's thoughts and his dramatic escapades in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer that one almost sees the three cousins transformed into those pranksters:

... that the absence of children would heighten the adults' remorse. It would make them truly sorry, like the grownups in Hamelin after the Pied Piper took away all their children. They would search everywhere; just when they were sure...
that all three of them were dead, they would all return home in triumph.
Valued, loved, and needed more than ever. Her clinching argument was that
if she were left behind she might be tortured and forced to reveal their
hiding place. (292)

Only here, the dream turns into a full-scale nightmare unlike in Mark
Twain. There is an attempt to bring in local colour, i.e., the
atmosphere of Kerala into the novel, by reference to Kathakali and its
traditions, the temple elephants (one of whom is electrocuted, in keeping
with the disaster-filled world-view of Roy's novel) as well as the boat
songs of Kerala, and the boat races during which they are sung. There is,
of course, the romantic tragedy Chemmeen with its patriarchal overtones
of the need for female chastity if Kadalamma (‘mother-ocean’) is to be
bountiful to her sons, the fishermen. The epics Kama Shabadam and
Duruyodhana Vadham are re-told by the Kathakali dancer to suit the “ungodly
human heart.” The re-telling of the two epics herein is connected to the
experience that Rahel and Estha have had, shaped by the controlling
viewpoint of the Ammu-Velutha affair and its aftermath as experienced by
the twins. Thus, Kunti and Ammu get linked in the commonality of their
motherhood. Similarly, the “madness” of the early-morning performance of Bhima drinking Dushyasana's blood is transformed and
transferred into the frenzy of another morning: “the brutal extravagance of this” is matched “by the savage economy” of that morning, an obvious
reference to Velutha's arrest (307-12) on the morning after Sophie Mol's
death as in "The sober, steady brutality, the economy of it all" (308).

Another important point that needs to be discussed here is the similarity
between Roy's narrative and Faulknerian texts: though there may not be the
same kind of multiple-narrator perspective that he employs, the story of
Ammu, Velutha and twins is retold by the omniscient third-person narrator
from the point of view of Baby Kochamma, the twins, the police inspector
and so on. The reference to Ammu's illicit affair begins in the very first
chapter and our journey towards the reality of forbidden love involves a
circling view of the childhood of the twins and we even delve into the family's
history before a full view of the lovers is afforded to us, in a manner
comparable to Faulkner's narrative in The Sound and the Fury or Light in August
or Absalom, Absalom!

Indeed, there are many similarities in structure, character and attitude
between Faulkner's magnum opus Absalom, Absalom! and The God of Small
Things. The twins Rahel and Estha possess a twin soul, or rather a single soul
and two bodies that is akin to the single/unified identity shared by the
Judith/Charles Bon/Henry Sutpen triumvirate in Absalom, Absalom! as is the
incestuous relationship they share: "that single personality with two bodies
both of which had been deduced by a man whom at the time Judith had never
even seen" (Absalom, Absalom! 91-92). Velutha in The God of Small Things,
though much older than the twins and not entangled in the incestuous
relationship (since he has been dead and gone) could be said to have a similar
place in The God of Small Things to that occupied by Charles Bon in Faulkner's
novel, since both are rejected in different ways because of the racist/casteist
attitudes of the other characters. Baby Kochamma the unfulfilled virgin of The
God of Small Things is not far different from Rosa Coldfield of Absalom,
Absalom! who suffers "an itching winter's discontent" and dries up even as
she wishes to bloom (Absalom, Absalom! 145-48). For instance, there are
similar overtones of long frustrated years in Kochamma's "waiting" for Father
Mulligan and Rosa's "waiting" "not for light but for that doom which we call
female victory..." (144), a victory initially to be realized through Sutpen,
and later as a vicarious imaginary substitute to Judith, through Charks Bon. The
parallels between the ineffectual Ammu of The God of Small Things and
Sutpen's first wife Ellen who hardly ever acts with any initiative in Absalom,
Absalom! are notable too.

William Faulkner's general world view is animalistic and perverted and
Roy's chapter "Abhilash Talkies" (94-123), which deals with the sexual abuse
of Estha as a eight-year-old boy, is not far different. Again, the narrative of The
God of Small Things is controlled by the views of the twins and Baby
Kochamma, besides the omniscient third person narrator, just as Faulkner's.
Similarly, the survivors at the end in The God of Small Things viz., Baby
Kochamma as well as Rahel and Estha are half (if not fully) insane, on a
parallel to the howling idiot Jim Bond who screams in the ruins of the burnt
Sutpen mansion in Absalom, Absalom. The (sub)text and the intertext of The
God of Small Things is thus permeated with considerable decadence and
pessimism: the world-view that emerges is not very positive.

To conclude, Shashi Deshpande uses intertextuality as a means to build
up a women's genealogy, emphasizing the role of women in (hi)story, a role
that has often gone unrecorded. Intertextuality in Roy's work, on the other
hand, is used to emphasize a pessimistic world-view and the tragic fate of
virtually all the important characters in the novel. Postcolonial impulses thus
manifest themselves differently in Deshpande and Roy due to their varied use
of intertextuality.

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Works Cited

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