

How to Write Home: (Un)Mapping the Politics of Place and Authorial Responsibility with Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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When it comes to writers and writing, I use words like 'onerous' and 'responsibility' with a heavy heart and not a small degree of sadness.

– Arundhati Roy¹

Abstract

Arundhati Roy's 1997 Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, was harshly criticised by Indian and international scholars alike for misrepresenting the cultural landscape of 1970s Kerala and greater India. Such criticisms deny Roy's authority to represent Indian culture, and her right to speak of or accurately represent her birthplace. This essay draws from Roy's first and only novel as a case study of place-based writing and its reception, then asks: can a responsibility to place or home ever be met in the genre of autoethnographic fiction? The first section of this essay surveys criticisms of Roy's Kerala and reveals how transgressive place-based fiction can magnify negative stereotypes of a given culture. The second section investigates literature as a material artefact of place with value to sociology and cultural studies more broadly, thus situating the author as a social actor. Throughout, I reflect on my own autoethnographic writing practice, and devise questions about my personal onus to represent a fictionalised home that has the potential to (re)shape Southeast Queensland in the cultural imagination.

A Place Called Home

As a writer, I have assumed that the neighbourhoods of Southeast Queensland, where I learned to read and write, are mine to reproduce and twist into text on page, just as the region has yielded and moulded me. Southeast Queensland is the backdrop, the stage, and the pervasive presence in all my autofictions, and the characters resemble the locals: my neighbours, my co-workers, my family, me. Concurrently, there is a tug, like the pull of stitches, which reminds me that others are implicated culturally by how I represent the home we unequally share. Further, because I am privileged to have a voice within the context of the university – a voice that others may be unable to contest – I wonder whether a responsibility to place exists, and if so, whether this responsibility is loosened when the writing is principally fictional. To explore this dilemma, I turn my gaze outward and analyse the reception of Arundhati Roy's 1997 Man Booker Prize-winner, *The God of Small Things*: a novel set in a fictional town in Kerala, which drew the attention of literary critics who read her work as autoethnography and evaluate her representations of the real Kerala and India.

¹ Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2001) 4.

While Southeast Queensland does not share the same recent history of political turmoil and religious conflict as Kerala, both regions have memories and ongoing experiences of violent colonisation, the effects of which still oppress generations today. Of course, my writing may never see the same scrutiny that Roy has faced for *The God of Small Things*, and these two distinct places are not equally vulnerable to skewed representation, but in this comparison lies the question of responsibility to home in its multitudes of voices and histories. What, then, is the extent of a fiction writer's responsibility in representing a place when it is bloodied, contested, and unequally shared among those who call place *home*? And can this responsibility to the place called home ever be met in the genre of autoethnographic fiction?

This essay analyses why literary critics are unsatisfied with the setting of *TGOST*, considering that the novel is a work of fiction. Extrapolating on such receptions, I consider possible consequences for my own fiction, a work that explores experiences of being a local in Southeast Queensland. I deduce that even fictional representations of place project directly at a real landscape, which then (re)shape place in the cultural imagination. I do not consider Roy's novel emblematic or not emblematic of Keralan society, but instead refer to her novel's setting as a highly personal, imagined projection of a real place, which has power in its fictionality. To understand why critics interpret setting as intimately linked with reality, I engage with pragmatic sociology's progress on configuring the author as a social actor. Sociologists, humanist geographers, and theorists on place and belonging articulate fiction's capacity to capture an essence of place of which few non-fiction genres are capable. Thus, place-based fiction becomes a highly subjective ethnography. One must then consider that a fiction of Kerala or of Southeast Queensland cannot remain self-contained – but inevitably forms a dialectic between identities of place beyond the text, and so becomes a representation of Indian or Australian society.

The Problem of Home

Much literary criticism of *TGOST* discounts the novel's sex, class, and political discourses to argue that the setting, and indeed the novel itself, does not represent an authentic Kerala. Throughout such criticisms the onus is implicitly on Roy to write a particular version of Kerala that upholds particular 'Indian' values. The novel, though, undercuts ideas of normative Indian sexuality and Indian political culture through its parallel storylines and characterisation, including incest between twins and a cross-caste affair between a Christian single mother and a communist labourer. Consequently, *TGOST* is seen as 'powerful protest novel' where 'all sorts of boundaries,' that is, boundaries between class and limits on sexuality, 'are transgressed upon'.² Because of these transgressions, the novel has been criticised internationally for failing to accurately represent the values and attitudes of Roy's home state, Kerala. A.N. Dwivedi, echoing the concerns of other critics, argues that Roy 'should have nurtured the social and cultural values of India,' and labels such neglect as 'a blunder'.³ Dwivedi does not specify what constitutes such 'values,' but based on his criticisms, seems to refer to nuclear family structures, heteronormative

² R.S. Pathak, 'The Fictional World of Arundhati Roy', *The Fictional World of Arundhati Roy* edited by R.S. Pathak (New Delhi: Creative Books 2001) 17.

³ A.N. Dwivedi, 'Reversing the Gear: A Critique of *The God of Small Things*,' *The Fictional World of Arundhati Roy* edited by R.S. Pathak (New Delhi: Creative Books 2001) 185

sexuality, and caste segregation, which stratify the political landscape of Kerala. R.S. Sharma agrees that 'if [Roy] had any intention of writing a national allegory, she has failed'.⁴ Noteworthy here is that Roy's novel set entirely within Kerala is read as a national text, suggesting that local and national identities 'are categories which bleed into each other'.⁵ In excavating the novel for illustrations of the dominant culture, Dwivedi implies that ideology and landscape are not only co-dependent, but fixed to a static culture; transgressions are tantamount to lies.

Other critics argue that the novel is not unauthentic simply for being transgressive but is unauthentic because such transgressions are supposedly 'Western': an argument that establishes a binary of morals between India and the western world. Critics do not specify how an authentically Indian transgression might appear in fiction or otherwise, but they are adamant that *TGOST*'s transgressions are not that, so the novel cannot be realism. Sharada Iyer, who praises the novel's setting for its 'vivid scent' and 'colour',⁶ maintains that the 'story is about an Indian village ... but the sensibility is urban, Westernised and modern'.⁷ Elleke Boehmer probes the novel's references to 'western cultural forms,' including Elvis Presley, to establish that Roy has Westernised her work in attempt to make it 'multiple, extreme, scented, sensual, [and] transgressive'.⁸ Boehmer further argues that *TGOST* is '[o]verdetermined in all its strangeness, abstracted from its local context, stereotyped and restereotyped' and so has become 'commodified and made safe for a western readership'.⁹ Inferring that Roy's novel deliberately sacrifices an authentic 'Indian' sensibility in favour of a West-friendly rapport, Boehmer endorses Dwivedi's assumption that 'Roy has written her novel with the Western readership in mind'.¹⁰ According to Dwivedi, Roy trades authentic setting for commercial success, thus undermining the literary merit of the novel; while he concedes the accessibility of Roy's text, he assigns to Roy the responsibility of representing a 'true' India. Dwivedi's judgement is that Roy fails in this responsibility.

K.M. Pandey assents to a binary of transgressive/western/not real and cultivated/traditional/real while comparing Roy's Kerala to Thomas Hardy's fictional county of 'Wessex'.¹¹ Pandey disassociates Roy's setting from Kerala in the same way that Hardy's Wessex resembles, yet is not emblematic of, rural England. In doing so, Pandey implicitly identifies two Keralas: the fictional, textual Kerala, and the 'real' Kerala of his own lived and shared experience. Pandey quotes C.D. Narasimhaiah's evaluation that Roy's setting 'isn't

⁴ R.S. Sharma, 'The God of Small Things: Booker out of/and Booker?' *The Fictional World of Arundhati Roy*, edited by R.S. Pathak, 2001, 29-38. New Delhi: Creative Books 37

⁵ Rob Garbutt, *The Locals: Identity, Place and Belonging in Australia and Beyond*. New York: Peter Lang, 2011 4-5

⁶ Iyer Sharada, 'Ayemenem: Arundhati Roy's Literary Stage.' *The Fictional World of Arundhati Roy*, edited by R.S. Pathak, 2001. 137-142, New Delhi: Creative Books 138

⁷ Iyer 137

⁸ Elleke Boehmer, 'East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy,' *Women: A Cultural Review* 11.1-2 (2010): 61-70. 66

⁹ Boehmer 67

¹⁰ Dwivedi 179

¹¹ K.M. Pandey, 'The God of Small Things: Cultural Dead-Ends?' *The Fictional World of Arundhati Roy*, edited by R.S. Pathak, 2001. 80-87. New Delhi: Creative Books 80

Kerala,' but rather is 'Roy's fanciful picture, with remote resemblance to Kerala.'¹² Because this distinction between two Keralas is built on the premise that Roy's setting is fantastic, or even 'dystopian,'¹³ the novel, and by extension, Roy, are not credited with any authority in representing her home. The fictionality of the setting – as the bedrock of the entire novel – is emphasised to the point that Roy's having been born and raised in the setting of her novel, Kerala in the 1960s and 1970s,¹⁴ does not legitimise the novel's representations for these critics. As a result Roy's status as a local writer too becomes destabilised. The fact that Roy can lose this status implies that it must be earned in the first place, and then actively maintained.

The transgressions of the text could reflect an authorial intrusion of anachronistic western sensibilities as well as reflect past and existing resistant cultures within Kerala and India broadly. Roy may style place as a westernised or transgressive India, but the two versions of reality do not have to cancel each other out. Sharma acknowledges that not all of novel's transgressions are anachronistic, and observes:

Roy presents a negative picture of Indian life, dwelling with gusto on squalor and filthy habits she perceives around her. She exhibits the image of mother in an unfavourable light, includes incest in the story and attempts voyeurism ... [M]ost of these things are part of today's literary scene in India and some of them are imitations of Western trends.¹⁵

Regardless of whether Roy 'imitates' western depictions of India, it seems the transgressive nature of text – which represents Kerala as politically unstable and sexually patriarchal – has been most commonly associated with the west, but that imitation does not in itself delegitimise *TGOST* as an authentic representation of Kerala. There is an obvious value judgment in Sharma's assessment of characterisation in the novel, though he does illuminate a crucial point that India, at least in Western cinema and storytelling, is frequently represented as impoverished and turbulent.

Nilanjana Bardhan notes that Western depictions of an exoticised and unclean India risk inflating 'the "third world" poverty stereotype of India ... that is so often conflated with cultural worth.'¹⁶ In the case of *TGOST*, it is not a depiction of a 'filthy' landscape that skews the image of India, but rather it is the subjectively amoral conscience of Roy's characters that blur an image of India as cultivated. This 'cultivated India' dialectically opposes that stereotype of squalor and despair, so is perhaps seen as necessary for Indian narratives to balance dominant representations in the cultural imagination. Implicit in Sharma's critique is a charge of responsibility; Roy's responsibility as a local Kerala writer is perhaps not to represent one part of India – Kerala – realistically; her charge is to instead showcase the other, underrepresented side of India as equally authentic to those mainstream western representations of India as the 'third world'. She must, in some critics' opinions, represent all of India in positive light so that

¹² C.D. Narasimhaiah 182

¹³ Pandey 80

¹⁴ Julie Mullaney, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Reader's Guide*, New York: Continuum Contemporaries, 2005 7

¹⁵ Sharma 30

¹⁶ Nilanjana Bardhan, 'Slumdog Millionaire Meets "India Shining": (Trans)national Narrations of Identity in South Asian Diaspora,' *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 4.1 (2011): 42-61. 43-44

India in the cultural imagination, rather than in any standalone text, can be represented as a multitudinous whole.

I had always assumed that depicting my home in fiction – the stained carpets, the broken furniture, the violent alcoholics, and the trolleys in the creek – could evade criticism since these are aspects of place I have seen and experienced. While I mean to write a realistic account of an imperfect place, respected peers warn that the low socioeconomic Southeast Queensland I write could read as poverty tourism: a voyeuristic exaggeration of everyday life. Southeast Queensland locals already have a reputation throughout Australia as ‘rednecks,’ especially since the second rise of the nationalist party One Nation in the state of Queensland. In Southeast Queensland the city of Logan measures high in disadvantage¹⁷ and the Gold Coast has become stereotyped in the news, reality television, and other fictions as the Crime Capital of Australia.¹⁸ On the other end of the scale, the Gold Coast is known as a place of privilege, as a ‘premier tourist destination... separated from the normal workday environment’¹⁹. While I do not expect that in an Australian context my representation of Southeast Queensland will be delegitimised as Roy’s novel has, I worry that I could reinforce a binary between representations of Southeast Queensland as either a dangerous crime capital or luxurious escape. This binary is not so polarised as that of poverty and exoticism to which India is subjected; however, these representations of Southeast Queensland are problematic since both silence Aboriginal Australian experiences and normalise the ongoing colonisation of land and culture by the west.

Both India and Australia have a violent history of European oppression, class and race wars, and an ongoing postcolonising culture that is often normalised in mainstream representations of place and being a local. Deepti Misri finds that “‘India” is widely perceived by residents as a colonizing entity rather than a hospitable home.’²⁰ In Australia, Aileen Moreton-Robinson highlights how a claim to home is not equally accessible to all Australians since ‘the sense of belonging, home and place enjoyed by the non-Indigenous subject – colonizer/migrant – is based on the dispossession of the original owners of the land’²¹. Because the ‘history of Southeast Queensland in particular has not been addressed from a very balanced perspective’²² my status as a white, first-generation Australian who has inherited the privileges of stolen land means I could continue the postcolonising process through the sheer act of writing a place-based novel with a stake of ownership in the word ‘home.’ Like Rob Garbutt, who reflects on his problematic status as a local in Australia, my ‘everyday experience is far from’ one of exile and oppression²³.

¹⁷ Logan City Council. Logan City: SEIFA disadvantage by Local Government Area, 2011.

¹⁸ ABC 2011; Stockwell 2011

¹⁹ Hilary P.M. Winchester and Kathryn Everett, ‘Schoolies Week as a rite of passage: a study of celebration and control,’ In *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, bodies and rites of passage*, edited by Elizabeth Kenworthy Teather, 2000, 59-76. London: Routledge 59

²⁰ Deepti Misri, *Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence, and Representation in Postcolonial India*, 2014, Chicago: University of Illinois Press 5

²¹ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ‘I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society,’ *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, edited by Sarah Ahmed, 2003. 23-40. Oxford: Berg Publishing 23

²² Ysola Best, ‘An Uneasy Coexistence: An Aboriginal Perspective of ‘Contact History’ in Southeast Queensland,’ *Aboriginal History* 18 (1994): 87-94. 87

²³ Rob Garbutt, ‘Towards an Ethics of Location,’ *Landscapes of Exile: Once Perilous, Now Safe*, edited by Anna

In even staking claim to any version of home that is *mine* I purport a ‘proprietary and possessive *belonging*’²⁴ that delegitimises further Indigenous perspectives of and right to place. The onus, of course does not lie on me to appropriate others’ stories, though I suspect that a novel that does not include Aboriginal collaborations, characters, or discourses cannot be an Australian novel. As the criticism of *TGOST* has demonstrated, a failure to capture the essence of nationhood equates to a failure to represent any scale of place within that nation.

Roy, though, does not simply represent a squalid India, although that is the main concern of literary critics. Her Kerala is patriarchal, moralistic, politically-turbulent, dangerous, and the landscape is lush and exotic. She represents Kerala as multi-dimensional and culturally rich – albeit complicated and oppressive – with transgressive characters who are educated/thoughtful, passionate, kind, progressive, and lost. Her Kerala is thus a tapestry, with gaps in representation and with privileged points-of-view, but multi-dimensional nonetheless. Representing place as multi-dimensional makes way for divergent and oppositional perspectives: we see that if a place can yield as much culture and as many contradictions as *this*, then there must be much more to place than even this. Bardhan observes that western perspectives of India and Indian perspectives of its many selves ‘are comingling in ways that often make it hard to describe cultural identity in terms of purity or sameness.’²⁵ Drawing from Homi Bhabha, Bardhan argues that developing an Indian identity or cultural politics is ‘lodged in difference rather than in sameness.’²⁶ Therefore, representing extremes of place is not necessarily didactic as long as contradictions, inconsistencies, and other points of view are also present in one way or another; it is from these various experiences of home that a multidimensional place is carved. Shakuntala Banaji analyses the reception of the Academy Award Winner for Best Picture, *Slumdog Millionaire*, which, like *TGOST*, was criticised for its narrow representations of India as an impoverished and dangerous landscape. Banaji grants that despite the cultural problem of exacerbating negative representations of India, such depictions are valuable in recognising the complexity of place when they sit alongside inclusive and divergent representations. Banaji writes:

this dialectic in opinion formation between (national, rational) self and the (exotic or despised) other is common to ethnographic documentary and to fiction film ... it is equally important to recognize moments in his film and in others like it that draw us into dialogues, both real and imaginary but always political.²⁷

If a text can open a space of difference around and through which dialogues of place can develop, then does Roy or any writer have a responsibility to instead fill that gap with an equally didactic – albeit a positive and alternative – paradigm of place? To consider the problematic representations of home and the rightful/plural owners of the land who have been exiled and silenced means facing the potentially harmful effect a narrow or possessive representation of

Haebich and Baden Offord, 2008. 175-192. Oxford: Peter Lang 175

²⁴ Garbutt 176

²⁵ Bardhan 54

²⁶ Bardhan 58

²⁷ Shakuntala Banaji, ‘Seduced “outsiders” versus skeptical “insiders”?: *Slumdog Millionaire* through its re/viewers,’ *Participations: journal of audience and reception studies* 7.1 (2010): 1-24. 21

place can have on those groups. It seems that writing place is an act of definition, and of inclusion and exclusion for the environment and its people. While one text may never encapsulate all experiences of place, there are strategies for acknowledging such limitations. Leaving room for doubt, for transgression, and dialectical voices at least points to those who have been again silenced, but perhaps not erased. This is a moderate responsibility of place-based fiction if fiction is to (in)directly an entire locality or nation, and by extension, the people who call that place home.

There is of course the question of creative license in fiction. As Banaji explicitly identifies and other critics imply, place-based fictions are read as auto/ethnography. In the next section of this essay, I draw from sociologists and humanist geographers to examine why fiction authors are treated as social actors and their works read as material artefacts of place if not ethnographic documents.

Literature as Material Artefact of Place

Because Roy's novel is criticised for its transgressions, the Kerala of the novel is delegitimised as merely fiction, which is ironic since the novel is criticised as if it were a work of auto/ethnography. Consequently, it seems that literary critics, and perhaps even the lay readers they represent, bundle writers of fiction with a responsibility to represent place, even if only some critics enforce and evaluate that responsibility. One might surmise that such efforts to prove a distinction between Roy's Kerala and the perceived 'reality' of Kerala are unnecessary since the novel is marketed as fiction, and so some discrepancies between representations of place are expected. However, Roy's Kerala remains a popular subject of debate, and so I ask why place-based novels are held to a standard of ethnographic documentation, and if such a task can ever be met in a work of fiction.

Perhaps one reason why literary scholars criticise Roy's representation of Kerala as if her novel were a work of (auto)ethnography, and are accordingly offended by the novel's transgressions, is because the novel might in fact contain autobiography and descriptions of lived events. If the novel were in fact based in Roy's and her family's history, then the transgressions of the novel would contribute to conceptions of place as autobiography, and Roy would be answerable only to those who could disprove her personal experiences. Reading her work as partial autobiography, or autofiction, means Roy's fictional Kerala and her home Kerala converge and so become a valid depiction of that place's identity. Although it is beyond the scope and interest of this essay to distinguish her novel as autobiography or fiction, or autofiction from ethnography, it should be noted that critics do attempt to find verifiable 'truth' in *TGOST*, perhaps to better classify the genre of the novel and its relative truth claims. For instance, Iyer notes the phonetic similarities between 'Ayemenem' – the Kerala town of Roy's novel – and 'Aymanam,' an actual town in Kerala.²⁸ Boehmer too notes Roy's 'cross-caste background,' architectural studies, and upbringing in Kerala – all of which Roy shares with a character in her novel – in order to establish that the novel is 'conflation of biography.'²⁹ Julie

²⁸ Iyer 138

²⁹ Boehmer 64

Mullaney, Alex Tickell, A. G. Khan, and Dwivedi likewise identify several possible instances of autobiography and ethnography in Roy's novel.

If Roy's characters and plot points are accurate representations of her experiences, then her setting and the transgressions within setting are not fiction, as the novel is marketed, but direct responses to and representations of Indian culture. Roy's novel, as a work of autoethnography, challenges the dominant political ideologies and conceptions of India as a manifesto. As a result, one must question of hybrid fiction: 'where does ethnography stop and autobiography begin, given that writing the self and writing to significant other of the self can be classed as both?'³⁰ Kirin Narayan notes that because

gracefully written ethnographies and socially observant novels ... overlap along a continuum of narrative form ... this playful equation of ethnography and fiction points to a larger confusion about where ethnography ends and fiction begins.³¹

This uncertainty about how to map the distinctions among ethnography, autobiography, and fiction drives the efforts of critics to prove that a work of fiction is in fact fiction. As fiction, Roy enjoys creative licence, but as autoethnography, the content of *TGOST* must be verifiable and thus contestable. Roy's unbelievable insistence that her novel is fiction despite the feasible parallels drawn between her experiences therefore engenders suspicion among critics and her respective degrees of responsibility.

Conspicuously, during an interview, Roy maintained that her novel is neither autoethnography nor about Indian culture, but is about 'human nature.'³² However, this denial arguably concerns critics more than if the work had been marketed as non-fiction, because without clear categorisation associated with truth-telling, critics are disempowered to refute representations of place. Consequently, Roy is not responsible to accurately represent her experiences or the dominant ideologies of place. This could be why some critics, while at once reading Roy's work as autoethnography, highlight the apparent unrealistic qualities of the novel in order to firmly situate the novel as fiction, thereby devaluing the legitimacy of Roy's Kerala as autoethnographic. Critics thus treat Roy's novel as a failure of autoethnography, because despite the social effects of fiction, fiction 'does not bear the [same] responsibility [to] "truthful" representation' as ethnographic writing.³³ Therefore, responsibility to representing place is loosened if the writing is evaluated as principally fiction, though, Roy is deauthorised as an authority on Indian culture due to her representations of Kerala. Even as fiction, though, *TGOST*, because it is as a place-based novel, paints reality.

Pragmatic sociologists, Shai Dromi and Eva Illouz research the relationship between fiction and cultural knowledge, and explain that fiction is valuable to sociology because each viewpoint, however subjective, contributes to our conceptions of place and society. They argue that because

³⁰ Andrew Sparkes, 'Autoethnography and Narratives of Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action,' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17.1 (2000): 21-43. 36

³¹ Kirin Narayan, 'Ethnography and Fiction: Where is the Border?' *Anthropology and Humanism* 24.2 (2008): 134-147. 134-136

³² Arundhati Roy, 'An Interview with Arundhati Roy,' *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 29.1 (1998): 89-92. Interviewed by Taisha Abraham 1

³³ Joan Sharp, 'Towards a critical analysis of fictive geographies,' *Area* 32.3 (2005): 327-334. 327. 329

these viewpoints reflect society, they should be debated: ergo, the novel is fiction, but the perspectives are not. For Dromi and Illouz, a politically, morally, or intellectually challenging novel and the resulting questions and criticisms 'are an inseparable' and important 'part of reading.'³⁴ This is because:

[A] reader's criticism of a text is important to the sociologist regardless of his or her class, education, or training in literary criticism and whether or not it succeeds in persuading others. In this view then, moral judgment is not an anomalous reaction to literature but, on the contrary, a natural one, that is, one that responds to the moral competence of texts and their authors.³⁵

For Dromi and Illouz, the 'natural' instinct to read a work of fiction as a cultural artefact or manifesto compels a critic to do so. In their eyes, the work of the sociologist or literary critic is to recognise and accept this impulse and subsequently treat the author as ethnographer. This shifts the weight of representation slightly from the text as the author's manifesto to the text as the reader's manifesto; although, the author on the other side of the work is still read as a map-maker and social commentator.

It is worth noting that Dromi and Illouz do not mark a definite border between fiction and reality in their argument, unlike some literary critics. This is because fiction reveals social *truths* – or 'human nature,' as Roy points out – and so is faithful to an essence of place. Still, an essence of place blurs the boundary between the textual representation and the real place to which the text refers. However, a fiction imbued with apparent social truth situates the author as a moral or ethical being who is inescapably political in meaning. Therefore, a fictional novel, and especially a political one, is valuable in its dissection since one can explore the ideologies of author and critic, which, together, form dialogues about society and place. A place-based fiction is therefore not necessarily a record of a society and place itself, but rather is a record of attitudes and morality formed from society and digested again as it is read. Place, then, is a container of ideology, and the novel an imprint of those ideologies. Thus, an imaginative and political projection of any real place in the mode of realism 'turns narrative analysis into an activity of "cultural analysis".'³⁶ Arguably, then, a writer of fiction is also an accidental sociologist – whose method is creative writing. Concurrently, consequently, when critics evaluate representations of Kerala, they do not do so in order to enforce high ethical standards onto fiction, but they do so in recognition that place-based writing inevitably *is* place in some form or another.

Douglas Pockock maintains that even in what he calls 'imaginative fictions,' that is, fiction that does not or cannot claim to resemble reality, 'the truth of fiction is a truth beyond mere facts,' and so '[f]ictive reality may transcend or contain more truth than the physical or everyday reality.'³⁷ Pockock refers to empirical, personal acknowledgments of 'truth' and is not concerned

³⁴ Shai Dromi and Eva Illouz, 'Recovering Morality: Pragmatic Sociology and Literary Studies,' *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 351-369. 359

³⁵ Dromi and Illouz 359

³⁶ Mieke Bal, *Narratology Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed, London: University of Toronto Press, 1997 11.

³⁷ Douglas Pockock, 'Introduction: imaginative literature and the geographer,' *Humanistic geography and literature:*

with identifying facts; although, literary critics could internalise this concept of ‘truth’, either consciously or unconsciously, and thus concern themselves with the morality of the work and the responsibility of the author. In further (re)scoping the role of the fiction writer, Susan Friedman argues that in the case of *TGOST*, the novel ‘functions as the symbolic form of the national state,’ as a site of ‘encounter[s], of border crossings and cultural mimesis.’³⁸

Corroborating this perspective is Joan Sharp, a professor of geography whose research has led her to consider the significance of literary fiction in recording place and its social dynamics. Sharp assesses the ways in which literature can capture the voice of place: the socio-cultural and political, and environmental ambience of geography. She observes that geographers regard ‘literature as a material artifact’ due to ‘the evocative power of literary description’ for expressing ‘the less tangible, experiential aspects of geographies.’³⁹ Therefore, aesthetics of fiction that are comparatively regarded as subjective or immeasurable, such as metaphor, are in fact strengths of fiction in their contributions to social scientists’ conception of place. This is because metaphor, among other aesthetics, is trusted to symbolically represent an individual’s experiences, which are valuable in adding a pixel of colour to the larger snapshot of place. Therefore, the personal/subjective/mythic experience of place is privileged over the collective/objective/concrete measurements of place. In this light, ‘literature is part of material culture which intervenes in the mental appropriation of the world.’⁴⁰ If a fictional setting is indeed a container to preserve perspectives of place, or rather, a kind of stratosphere that contains the atmosphere of place, then that would stitch the fictional world and the reality to which it refers together. This idea submits that fiction viably demonstrates reality, and consequently, that the hero of the novel’s lived experience is either emblematic of, or is a microcosm of, all the multiplicities of that shared space in ‘reality.’ Consequently, the fictional writer, or more specifically, the regional writer, is a social actor, historian, translator, and biographer and can be criticised accordingly.

Writing Home

I am aware that ideological operations in the text could be read as my own manifesto if not an imprint of the discursive debates mingling in place itself. Unlike autobiography, in which the author is solely responsible for representing place as a projection toward their own lived and read experiences, fiction throws a wide net over place. Perceived responsibility to writing place in fiction varies, with cultural analysis and conflation of ethnography an inevitable part of reading fiction for place. Kerala, as both Roy’s childhood home and textual treatment of her home, shapes Roy’s authorial identity as she likewise shapes physical and ambient representations of that place. The cyclical nature of this logic embeds the two Keralas within each other, so unites the fictionalised Kerala of the novel and the ‘real’ Kerala in cultural imagination into a consummated whole. Critics subsequently tear at the stitches that bind ‘reality’

essays in the experience of place, edited by Douglas Pockock, 1981. 9-19. London: Croom Helm. 11

³⁸ Susan Friedman, ‘Spatial Poetics and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*,’ *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, 2007. 192-205. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 196

³⁹ Sharp 327

⁴⁰ Sharp 328

and art together. They are inclined to disprove Roy's work as autoethnography and highlight the novel's fiction, because these critics understand that to dispute truth one first must understand what is purported to be truth. When critics can map out what in the novel is verifiable, lived, or imagined, then they can enter a debate of meaning. However, as sociologists have observed, lived experience cannot be differentiated from imagination simply.

Writing about the Southeast Queensland for me, is not intentionally about asserting or recording ownership or familiarity over place, or what Susan Midalia calls 'the pleasure of recognition.'⁴¹ But if I can disrupt stereotypes of Southeast Queensland as crime capital or site of egalitarian belonging, and instead focus on the different ways locals negotiate their alienation, I can capture a culture of 'difference' rather than simply reinforcing an image of static disadvantage. This approach of representing difference acknowledges that any one text limits the multitudes of place, and in doing so, somewhat avoids speaking on others' behalf. As a result, ideologies and transgressions in the text embody place-making instead of representing didactically a possessed home. The author, with this approach, can responsibly contribute to the image of place in the cultural imagination, since the 'genius of the author is to a great extent displaced into the logic of his or her social location.'⁴² Therefore my work could be read not as *the* Southeast Queensland or even *my* Southeast Queensland, but simple as *one* version of home as I know and share it.

Of course, writers can always write fiction and bolster that genre to absolve themselves from responsibilities of representation. But as place-based writers, whose work will inform dialogues about place in the cultural imagination, perhaps there is a higher degree of consideration required, especially when that place's histories and ownership is contested, and belonging is unequal. In such cases, even local narratives – stories that attempt only to capture a microcosm or corner of a nation – are political in their representation of locality and diversity. Local narratives hold a self-and-spatial-awareness that can change the image of what a real place is.

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⁴¹ Susan Midalia, 'The Idea of Place: Reading for Pleasure and the Workings of Power,' *English in Australia* 47.3 (2012): 44-51. 44

⁴² Sharp 329

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