e-ISSN 2499-5975

Il Tolomeo
Vol. 24 – Dicembre | December | Décembre 2022

Trauma, Multimodal Mental Imagery and Intermediality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Paola Carmagnani
Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia

Abstract Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has been effectively described by N. Rokotnitz as a narrative that accesses and arouses sensory modes of reception and perception, infiltrating reader's preconscious and subconscious levels of understanding and thus enhancing the vividness of immersion in a text that ultimately renders its moral code physically tangible. This use of multimodal mental imagery, which per se vouches for a transmedia understanding of narrative as a "multimedia construct" (Ryan 2004), is an integral part of a literary representation of trauma that also integrates explicit reference to other media, namely cinema and traditional dance performance. The essay addresses the role of these media within the socio-cultural frame of Roy's novel and interrogates their function in shaping the literary narrative of trauma and healing, integrating the writing's multimodal imagery and contributing to the reader's emotional and intellectual responses.

Keywords Multimodal mental imagery. Embodied cognition. Enactment. Trauma. Healing. Affective focalization. Empathy. Intermediality.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Towards Trauma: The Filmic Experience. – 3 Towards a Healing Space: The *Kathakali* Dance-Performance. – 4 Conclusions.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2022-07-30
Accepted 2022-10-15
Published 2022-12-19

Open access

© 2022 Carmagnani | CC BY 4.0

Citation Carmagnani, P. (2022). "Trauma, Multimodal Mental Imagery and Intermediality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*". *Il Tolomeo*, 24, 41-60.

1 Introduction

The God of Small Things has been definitively brought into the field of trauma studies by Elizabeth Outka, who argued that the novel's restructuring of narrative time, mostly analysed in relation to postcolonial criticism, should be considered primarily as a mark of trauma (Outka 2011). In the novel's "temporal hybridity", writes Outka,

> the present moment is at once a dangerous blending of many times, but also, paradoxically, a refusal of these moments to blend, signalling the past traumatic event's refusal to be integrated into an unfolding narrative. (23)

Founded on the modernist aesthetic of fragmentation, a major trope of trauma studies' first wave, Outka's argument affirms that the novel's hybrid temporal structure puts the readers in the position of experiencing themselves, to some degree, the aftereffects of trauma: "The narrative returns to images, phrases, and sensory experiences […] giving a textual demonstration of the paralysis experienced by the characters" and directly transmitting, rather than representing, "what is otherwise unrepresentable in traumatic experience" (30-1). Rather than on the novel's fragmented structure, I will focus here on these "images, phrases and sensory experiences", which must be grouped under the general denomination of "multimodal mental imagery".

As stressed by Naomi Rokotnitz, Roy's multimodal mental images combine "abstract metaphoric concepts with a direct appeal to readers' bodies, […] accessing and arousing sensory modes of reception and perception" and thus anchoring "ideational content in her readers' bodies" (Rokotnitz 2017, 274). Elaborated within the theoretical framework of embodied cognition, this notion of an enactive multimodal imagery has been developed by recent studies in cognitive and affective narratology, where it is linked to the experience of the immersive reading of literary texts: even in the absence of direct perception, argues Pierre-Louis Patoine, the reader can actually feel the somatic sensation described by the text, mobilizing and combining different sensory modalities as well as a set of related affective aspects (Patoine 2019, 205). The enactive experience elicited by multimodal images is thus "felt to occur spontaneously […] and seemingly without much cognitive effort" (Kužmičová 2014, 283), and may help the reader's interpretation of the textual construct. As suggested by Barbara Dancyngier, stylistic patterns such as words, expressions and other linguistic forms may function as "narrative anchors", prompting the meaning construction of fragmented narratives not "by directly adding information in the way we expect all texts to do", but by "setting up narrative [mental] spaces and links across the spaces" (Dancyngier 2007, 146). This is indeed the case of Roy's novel, where multimodal mental images function as

e-ISSN 2499-5975

"affective prompts" that "infiltrate the readers' preconscious and subconscious levels of understanding", rendering the "moral codes" of the text "physically tangible" (Rokotnitz 2017, 274-5).

Despite overcoming a view of trauma as necessarily linked to the impossibility of its narrative knowledge, the enormous potential of literary multimodal mental imagery in the representation of trauma has not yet resonated much in the field of trauma studies. An affective understanding of trauma seems however to be supported by new findings in neurosciences, where traumatic memories are seen as embodied and inextricably integrated with the affective dimensions of associated emotional responses: recollection is *per se* an attenuated form of re-enactment, and traumatic memories are unreconcilable embodied traces of memory whose emotional profile cannot be overridden, defying the abstract semantic categories we normally use to sort, organize and manipulate memory (Seeley 2018). "Situation models for narrative comprehension", writes William P. Seeley, "show us that these same neurobiological processes underwrite narrative understanding", suggesting that "literary texts can be used as a resource for representing, re-enacting, and understanding traumatic experience" (159). To my knowledge, the only attempt to actually bring the notion of trauma to the terrain of an affective understanding and representation is to date a body of research collected in the volume *Traumatic Affect* (Atkinson, Richardson 2013). In their introduction, Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson describe "traumatic affect" as "the experience of the body, moved by an encounter – with a text, with another, with art or culture, politics or experience", emphasizing however that this "is not a prescriptive and contained object, but an open one", around which very different approaches can be developed (7, 12). Elaborating on the broad notion of traumatic affect, I consider here that the enactive multimodal imagery of Roy's novel is the instrument of an 'affective encounter' with the reader, capable of rendering physically tangible not only the traumatic experience itself, but also the general meaning of the fragmented narrative and the dimension of a possible healing related to the trauma narrative.

My analysis will focus on two particular episodes of the novel, each of them included in one of the two interwoven temporal threads that build its structure, mingling past and present events, circling around, and offering at the same time a retrospective vision, as past events return in the present, and proleptic announcements of the story to come. Respectively marking the reader's first introduction into the narrative space of trauma and the passage towards a space of healing, the two episodes are significantly defined by reference to other media. How, then, do the sensory tracks specifically connected to other media's expressive power interact with the text's own multimodal imagery? How does intermediality contribute to the novel's shaping of trauma and healing?

e-ISSN 2499-5975

2 Towards Trauma: The Filmic Experience

The first intermedial episode coincides with the first of the traumatic chain of events that form the "bleached bones" of the story (Roy 2007, 33. From now on: *T.G.S.T.*). Included in the fourth chapter, the episode opens up in the cinema where Estha and Rahel, the protagonist twin children, have been accompanied by their mother Ammu and their aunt Baby Kochamma to see one of their favourite movies, *The Sound of Music*, a 1965 American world-famous musical drama starring Julie Andrews in the role of a young Austrian nun who is sent to the house of a widower officer to be the governess of his seven children, and eventually marries him.

As noted by Anita Sharma, despite mingling fragments of different events and the experiences of different characters in the novel "there is no polyvalence of perspectives simultaneously constructing a complex experience" (Sharma 1998, 169). The story is told by a third-person omniscient narrator, offering in fact a single point of view: that of those who have no power in the violent movement of history and are destined to be destroyed by it. It is a political choice that identifies the narrative with the point of view of some specific characters, mainly the twin children, who look at the adult world trying to understand it and will eventually be broken by its violence. The point of view of the powerless, however, is not restricted to an explicit focalization through those specific characters and the ironic inflexions that describe other characters. One of the most relevant and original features of the novel is indeed the extensive use of an "affective focalization",[1] which informs the narrative even when apparently maintaining a non-focalized mode, blending the omniscient narrator's voice with recurring words and expressions that refer mainly to the children's affective experience.

The chapter's opening sets up a narrative space that breaks up with the preceding images, presented in chapter two, of the trip from the family home in Ayemenem towards the cinema, in the town of Cochin. There, the children had been described as happy and excited, despite the adults' conflicts: it was "a skyblue day", in a "skyblue Plymouth" (*T.G.S.T.* 35). A recurring expression evoking the children's mental representation of two distinct words, the adjective "*skyblue*" marks the space of innocent childhood, those "early amorphous years

1 "Zero-focalization", argues Patrick Colm Hogan, "is a situation in which there is a narrator with emotions – emotions that lead him or her to select certain facts of the story world and not others – but whose reports are not focalized by any character of the story. […] Given that narrators select according to interest and preference, it may be that focalization […] is not always a matter of limitation in knowledge. It may equally be a matter of limitation in interest. In other words, we may distinguish between epistemic and affective focalization" (Colm Hogan 2010, 77-8).

when Memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever" (2). It is a sort of mythological space of the origins not yet tarnished by the traumas that are about to happen, where the twins, capable of having access to each other's memories, perceptions and emotions, find their peculiar fusional relationship. Now, presenting the family in the cinema lobby, the narrative immediately introduces a physical break into this crucial symbiotic bond, marked by Estha's first adult assignment:

> The toilets were called HIS and HERS. HERS for Ammu, Rahel and Baby Kochamma. HIS for Estha alone. […] Through the red Formica door that closed slowly on its own, Rahel followed Ammu and Baby Kochamma into HERS. She turned to wave across the slippery marble floor at Estha Alone (with a comb), in his beige and pointy shoes. Estha waited in the dirty marble lobby with the lonely, watching mirrors till the red door took his sister away. Then he turned and padded off to HIS. (94)

Anežca Kuzmičová argues that the vividness of spatial imagery is one key element in eliciting the readers' immersion into the storyworld, depending on a "first-person, *enactive* process of sensorimotor simulation/resonance, rather than from mere visualizing from the perspective of a passive, third-person observer":

> A higher degree of spatial vividness […] is achieved when certain forms of human bodily movement are rendered in the narrative, namely simple and "dynamically veracious" bodily actions. (Kuzmičová 2012, 24-5)

Here, the affective focalization which informs the description of the cinema lobby, with the dirty, slippery marble floor and the "lonely, watching mirrors", acquires a particular vividness through the simple movement of Rahel, slowly taken away by the red Formica door, conveying to the reader the sense of having physically entered a tangible, doom-laden environment where Estha becomes "Estha Alone". This expression belongs to a particular group of nominalised descriptions, which identify the children by their physical and emotional state at precise moments of the story and are eventually resumed, modified and expanded at other moments. The expression "Estha Alone" is significantly accompanied by the mention of two objects that hark back to the "skyblue" trip to Cochin, when Estha was featured in his "Special Outing" outfit: an "Elvis puff" and the "beige and pointy shoes" (*T.G.S.T.* 37).

Within the immersive vividness of the doom-laden lobby, the combination of these objects with the nominalised description places Estha in a space of vulnerability emotionally perceived by the read-

er, announcing the trauma that the child is about to undergo. In a following passage, showing "Estha alone in HIS", the sensorimotor images are furtherly elaborated through the studious actions performed by the child, searching for some "Height" in order to reach the urinal. Finding two rusty cans in a corner, "Estha Alone […] stood on them, one foot on each, and pissed carefully, with minimal wobble. Like a Man". Then, moving the cans in front of the mirror, he washes his hands, wets his hair, and carefully reconstructs his puff, "dwarfed by the size of Ammu's comb that was too big for him". Finally, he replaces the tins back where he found them and ceremoniously bows to them – "'Bow,' He said, and smiled, because when he was younger, he had been under the impression that you had to say 'Bow' when you bowed. That you had to say it to do it" (96-7). The accuracy of Estha's movements, which allow him to gain "Height" and urinate "like a Man", his adult "special outing" outfit and the final bowing, reminding him of a time (not so long ago) when he was little, build up the vivid image of a dignified little man, arousing the reader's empathy. "Estha Alone of the uneven teeth" (97), resumes the narrator, including in the original nominalised description a material sign of Estha's childhood that marks his vulnerability. Eventually, the emotional response aroused by the cumulative effect of these multimodal images finds an explicit mirroring in the description of Ammu's reaction when meeting Estha outside the toilets, "a sudden clutch of love for her reserved, dignified little son, in his beige and pointy shoes, who had just completed his first adult assignment" (97).

Having broken the twin's symbiotic identity through the space of Estha's vulnerable aloneness, the narrative proceeds to focalize on Rahel, walking up the stairs towards the cinema room "like an excited mosquito on a leash". Reproducing the rhythm of Rahel's bodily movements from her own internal perception – "Up two steps. Down two. Up one" – the text implicitly connects them to the rhythm of a song that she is singing in her mind, immediately transcribed onto the page.

> *I'm Popey the sailor man* dum dum
> *I live in a cara-van* dum dum
> *I op-en the door*
>
> *And Fall on the floor*
> *I'm Popeey the sailor man* dum dum

"*Excitement Always Leads To Tears*. Dum dum" (98), says the adults' reprimand in Rahel's mind, and from now on the "dum dum" of the happy childish song is transformed into the ominous rhythm of trauma and violence, returning through the whole narrative. Here, when the family eventually enters the cinema room, the text resumes

Il Tolomeo
24, 2022, 41-60
e-ISSN 2499-5975

through Rahel's perception the image of Estha's childish vulnerability, announcing again the trauma to come through the words and rhythm of the Popeye song: "Estha had the tickets. Little Man. He lived in a cara-van. Dum Dum" (99).

The narrative of the filmic experience integrates this construction, mediating the passage from the "skyblue" world towards the first traumatic event that will shatter it. The children's pleasure of immersing again into the beloved story-world of their favourite film is conveyed here through the olfactory familiar perceptions in "the fan-whirring, peanut-crunching darkness" of the cinema room – "It smelled of breathing people and hairoil. And old carpets. A magical, *Sound of Music* smell that Rahel remembered and treasured. Smells, like music, hold memories. She breathed deep, and bottled it up for posterity" (98-9). The film has begun, and the narrative focuses on the family's movements in the darkness of the cinema room, squeezing "past irritated people who moved their legs this way and that to make space", and finally finding their seats (99). Eliciting the reader's presence in the cinema besides an excited Rahel and a dignified Estha, the narrative gives access to the film's secondary story-world through the registration of the camera movements. Implicitly focalized through Rahel's perception, the camera "soars up into the skyblue (car-coloured) Austrian sky", showing from above the abbey's courtyard, with shining cobblestones and nuns walking across it "like slow cigars" (99). The nuns "had complaints to make to their Reverend Mother", "sweet-singing complaints" about Julie Andrews who is always late for mass:

> *She climbs a tree and scrapes her knees*
>
> the nuns sneaked musically.
>
> *Her dress has got a tear*
> *She waltzes on her way to Mass*
> *And whistles on the stairs…*
>
> People in the audience were turning around.
> "Shhh!" they said.
> Shhh! Shhh! Shhh!
> (99-100)

The shift from the images of the film to the sound of its music marks the transition from Rahel to Estha's experience, whose voice, "clear and true", suddenly raises from outside the picture causing the angry reactions of the audience: "It was Estha who was singing. A nun with a puff. An Elvis Pelvis Nun. He couldn't help it" (100).

Stressing the sudden interruption of Estha's immersive experience, the narrator describes the menacing faces of the audience, twist-

ing around "like bottle caps", "with mouths and moustaches. Hissing mouths with teeth like sharks. Many of them. Like stickers on a card" (100). However, Estha "couldn't help it", and the repeated, angry injunctions to silence – "'Get him out of here!' […] Shutup or Getout. Getout or Shutup", says the audience; "shut UP", says Ammu – reactivate and expand the images of his vulnerability, projecting him towards the traumatic event that he is about to live. "The Audience was a Big Man. Estha was a Little Man, with the tickets", resumes the narrator, showing Estha getting up and moving past "angry Ammu", past "Rahel concentrating through her knees", past Baby Kochamma, and past the "Audience", "that had to move its legs again. Thiswayandthat", towards the "red sign over the door [that] said EXIT in a red light". "Estha EXITED" (100-1): out of the familiar skyblue world of the film's music and back towards the grim space of the chapter's opening, where the "Big Man" anticipated by the audience's image turns into the "Orangedrinks Lemondrinks Man" who will abuse him.

Out of the cinema room and back into the lobby, the doom-laden atmosphere of the chapter's opening is transformed into an enchanted stillness, leading the reader into the space of trauma:

> In the lobby, the orangedrinks were waiting. The lemondrinks were waiting. The melty chocolates were waiting. The electric blue foamleather car-sofas were waiting. The *Coming Soon!* Posters were waiting.

Behind the refreshment counter, a man wakes up and sees "Estha Alone in his beige and pointy shoes. And his spoiled puff", sitting on the electric blue foam-leather car-sofa and deeply immersed in the film's song that he's now free to sing aloud – "*How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?*". Estha does not see him watching and in the enchanted stillness of the scene the man's wiping becomes a hypnotic, menacing movement, conveying to the reader alone his predatory presence: "And he waited. And waiting he wiped. And wiping he waited. And watched Estha sing" (101). The images of this passage take us into a black fairy-tale, where objects come alive and innocent children happily sing, unaware of the menacing stare of a man that looks like "an unfriendly jewelled bear", reproaching Estha for waking him up and inviting him behind the counter, where the "lonely, watching mirrors" described in the chapter's opening are watching Estha, too (102). Estha hesitates, but the image of the audience's menacing shark teeth returns, elaborated into that of the man's yellow teeth, watching "little Elvis the Pelvis" "like yellow piano keys": "His yellow teeth were magnets. They saw, they smiled, they sang, they smelled, they moved. They mesmerized", and "Estha went. Drawn by yellow teeth" (102-3).

Reintroducing the focalization on Estha's sensory perceptions, heightened and distorted by fear, the narrative proceeds to offer an enactive rendition of Estha's abuse:

> "Now, if you'll kindly hold this for me," the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man said, handing Estha his penis through his soft white muslin dhoti, "I'll get you your drink. Orange? Lemon?" Estha held it because he had to. [...] He got a cold bottle and a straw. So he held a bottle in one hand and a penis in the other. Hard, hot, veiny.

"Not a moonbeam" (103) comments the narrator, evoking the song's words to mark the traumatic shattering of Estha's skyblue world. Then, focusing on the man's "tight and sweaty" hand closing over Estha's hand and impressing an increasingly fast movement, the text transposes the very act of abuse into a tongue-twister that reproduces its rhythm:

> *Fast faster fest*
> *Never let it rest*
> *Until the fast is faster,*
> *And the faster's fest.*
> (104)

Extensively used throughout the novel to covey the children's sensory perceptions and emotions, language play is now made available to an enactive transcription of the dissociative mechanism experienced by Estha, who finds in the harmless tongue-twister a protective shelter from what is actually happening to him. A similar defensive mechanism is then conveyed through one of the many lists that translate into the text the children's attempts to keep at bay the chaotic violence of trauma (in this case a list of the pickles and preserves produced by Estha's grandmother).

Between the tongue-twister and the list, the central image of Estha's abuse is the "liquid lemon sweetness" rising from his drink, – "Stickysweet lemon bubbles of the drink he couldn't drink" – associated with the "wet and hot and sticky" sperm of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man on Estha's hand – "White egg white. Quarter-boiled" (104). Those images are analysed by Chris L. Fox as part of the novel's peculiar "narrative deployment of the abject and the traumatic", where the abject "is everything that the human excretes in order to live, all that might endanger our lives should we touch or ingest it" (Fox 2002, 35-6). Estha's sexual abuse, notes Fox, prepares him and the readers for the later, crucial trauma caused by the police attack on Velutha, the Untouchable carpenter who is the twins' secret friend and their mother's lover: Estha will be forced to watch Velutha's beloved body at the police-station, transformed

> into a near-corpse, whose bones and flesh have been transposed and whose inside-belonging blood, urine, and faeces are now not belonging, outside. (39)

The sticky sweetness that marks the "abjection" of Estha's sexual abuse is indeed linked to the image of Velutha's blood, "Sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze" (*T.G.S.T.* 293) one of the recurring multimodal images that since the beginning of the novel convey fragments of that crucial episode, inscribed into the children's traumatic memory.

Estha's post-traumatic condition informs the second part of the intermedial narrative, transforming the familiar immersion within the well-known images and sounds into a painful experience announced by the image of Estha's "Other Hand", which instead of a moonbeam held the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man's penis and is now soiled by his "white egg white": while regaining his seat, Estha carefully holds it upwards, "as though he was holding an imagined orange" (105). Wiping off every reference to the sound of music, the narrative is now restricted to the songs' words and the film's images, registered as static descriptions of a story-world that has lost its magic. Divested from its specific narrative power, the filmic medium thus becomes the vehicle for the narrative of Estha's post-traumatic perception, dominated by the shameful guilt embodied in his "Other Hand" and mainly conveyed in the form of other lists. The whole passage is centred around the opposition between the film's perfect story-world and the children's flawed lives and identities. Describing the film's story-world through their emotional point of view, the novel opens up an idealized space of 'whiteness' and 'cleanness', implicitly opposed to the twins' 'non whiteness' and to the shared sense of filth produced by Estha's abuse. Directly connected to this opposition appears their sense of being unworthy of love, as much as the film's "clean, white children" are, instead, loved by their father, Captain von Trapp, and by Julie Andrews, who puts them all "in her clean bed" (105-6):

> Oh Captain von Trapp, Captain von Trapp, could you love the little fellow with the orange in the smelly auditorium? […] And his twin sister? […] Could you love her too? (106)

The initial "magical *Sound of Music* smell" has turned into a disagreeable smell and the twins' questions are followed by a list of Captain von Trapp's own questions – "Are they clean white children?", is the one that opens the list; "Have they, either or both, ever held strangers' soo-soo?", is the closing one: "'Then I'm sorry,' Captain von Clapp-Trap said. 'It's out of the question. I cannot love them'" (107).

The idealized images of 'whiteness' and 'cleanness' produced by the twin's post-traumatic experience of the film function here as sensorimotor cues, emotionally conveying the cultural significance of the

film itself and situating the episode within a broader net of symbolic connections. The twins' painful perception of their own unworthiness harks back to their family's 'Anglophilia', a concept that had been previously explained by their uncle and condensed within the crucial image of the "History House" (53), identified by the children's imagination with the abandoned estate of an Englishman, "Ayemenem's own Kurtz" who made it "his private Heart of Darkness" (52). History, explained the twins' uncle, is "like an old house at night. With all lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside", where they cannot enter because they have been "locked out", "pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away": "because our minds have been invaded by a war. […] A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (52-3). The white and clean story-world of the children's beloved film is in itself a symbol of the colonization of the dominated minds, whose dreams have been captured and re-dreamt by a white culture, deeply inscribing a long-lasting sense of unworthiness and inferiority.

Announced since the beginning of the chapter as a break with the skyblue childhood, Estha's trauma marks thus the first fall out of a mythical time where "Everything was For Ever" into the awareness of History's violence, connecting the episode to a collective traumatic dimension. Within this broader dimension, the abuse of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man must also be seen as an expression of postcolonial class-conflict. Resenting Estha's anglophile privileged position and using his adult power to intimidate and punish him, he reproaches his victim for singing English songs in the lobby and for wasting his drink while he's abusing him – "Think of all the poor people who have nothing to eat or drink. You're a lucky rich boy, with pocketmunny and a grandmother's factory to inherit. You should Thank God that you have no worries" (104-5). At the level of the characters' individual story, we must also note that the film's title, *The Sound of Music*, and Estha's immersive experience of it, hark back to the temporal thread that opens the novel, twenty-three years after Estha's abuse and the following traumatic events: Estha has by now stopped talking, withdrawing into a silence that, together with his traumatic memories, has definitively shut up the 'sound of music' of his skyblue childhood – "Shutup or Getout. Getout or Shutup" (100).

e-ISSN 2499-5975

3 Towards a Healing Space: the *Kathakali* Dance-performance

The second intermedial occurrence entirely occupies chapter twelve and consists in the description of a traditional form of dance-drama performance called *Kathakali* (literally, a 'story play'), watched in the Ayemenem temple by the adult twins. Typical of the Kerala region and dating back to the 17th century, Kathakali adapts stories from the *Mahabarata* epic poem, recited by vocalists and performed by male actor dancers accompanied by *chenda* percussions. The first function of the episode is to elaborate an aspect of the environmental and cultural trauma produced by modern Indian economy. In a preceding chapter, we have already seen the transformations of the landscape around the old family house, where a barrage built by the landowners has turned the big river into "a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea" (*T.G.S.T.* 124), and the "House of History", bought by an international five-star hotel chain, has become a tourists' paradise publicized as "Gods' Own Country". In the evenings, "the tourists were treated to truncated kathakali performances", where "ancient stories were collapsed and amputated", "slashed to twenty-minutes cameos" staged by the swimming-pool – "'Small attention spans,' the Hotel People explained to the dancers" (127).

Chapter twelve resumes this narrative, showing the degradation of traditional culture through the point of view of the Kathakali dancers, who after the humiliation suffered at the "Gods' Own Country" stop at the Ayemenem's temple "to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives": "In the broad, covered corridor – the colonnaded kuthambalam abutting the heart of the temple where the Blue God lived with his flute, the drummers drummed and the dancers danced, their colours turning slowly in the night" (229). Converted to tourism by despair, the Kathakali dancers are here reinstated to their original power: "The Kathakali Man", says the narrator,

> is the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul. His only instrument. From the age of three it has been planned and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly in the task of story-telling. He has magic in him, this man within painted mask and swirling skirts. (230)

However, the presence of an artistic form of expression that literally embodies its stories is translated into a surprisingly static narrative, summarizing the dancers' stylized bodily movements from an external perspective, corresponding to the passive watching of the adult twins and conveying their post-traumatic emotional paralysis.

e-ISSN 2499-5975

Staging the violent confrontation between two powerful warriors, the closing of the performance brings back to the twins' memory the image of the policemen's deliberate destruction of Velutha's body, not yet narrated but, as we said, repeatedly anticipated by scattered fragments of multimodal images:

> It was no performance. Esthappen and Rahel recognized it. They had seen its work before. Another morning. Another stage. Another kind of frenzy (with millipedes on the sole of its shoes). The brutal extravagance of this matched by the savage economy of that. (235)

The image of Bhima clubbing Dhausana to the floor and pursuing "every feeble tremor in the dying body with his mace, hammering at it until it was stilled", as "an ironsmith flattening a sheet of recalcitrant metal. Systematically smoothing every pit and bulge" (235), is indeed connected to the "sourmetal smell" of the handcuffs uselessly immobilising Velutha's already destroyed body and, through it, to a wider cluster of multimodal images – "Still, they brought up the handcuffs. Cold. With the sourmetal smell", and after having smashed his penis (the "frenzy" of the policeman's boot, "with millipedes curled into its sole"), they "locked his arms across his back. Click. And click. […] He had goosebumps where the handcuffs touched his skin" (310-11).

As noted by Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, however, "the point here is not to link the image with an individual memory, but more to tighten the web of reverberations and resonances in the text" (2002, 60). Beyond the punctual echoing of Velutha's brutal capture, the Kathakali episode finds its place within a net of multimodal images that in the last chapters of the novel offer, together with the missing pieces of the trauma narrative, a possible space of healing. Built around the central image of Velutha as the "God of Small Things", this space is introduced by the Kathakali dancers, healing their humiliation through the nightly performance in the temple. Here, the desperate Kathakali Man with hollows in his crown and a darned costume transforms into the gods to which his body gives life:

> In his abject defeat lies his supreme triumph. He *is* Karna, whom the world has abandoned. Karna Alone. […] A prince raised in poverty. Born to die unfairly, unarmed and alone. (231-2)

Resuming and modifying Estha's nominalised description, the image of "Karna Alone", abandoned by the world, anticipates the narrative of Velutha's solitude and despair during the escape that will lead him to the House of History, to the policemen's beating and eventually to his death. In that narrative, in fact, the poor Untouchable carpenter is also transformed into a godlike image, healed from despair at the

very moment when, emerging from the river's waters, he steps onto the path leading to his violent death:

> He held his mundu spread about to dry. The wind lifted it like a sail. He was suddenly happy. *Things will get worse*, he thought to himself. *Then better*. He was walking swiftly now, towards the Heart of Darkness. As lonely as a wolf. The God of Loss. The God of Small Things. (290)

The first identification of Velutha with the God of Small Things occurs however in the chapter immediately preceding the Kathakali episode, in the narrative of a dream that reveals to Ammu her own unacknowledged desire for Velutha's body. In Ammu's dream, Velutha is never designated by his name but only as "The God of Loss", "The God of Small Things": a young man with "ridges of muscle on his stomach […] like divisions on a slab of chocolate", a shining body "as though he had been polished with a high-wax body polish", and one single arm – "He had no other arm with which to fight the shadows that flickered around him on the floor" (*T.G.S.T.* 215). Born from Ammu's desire, Velutha's transformation into a godlike figure parallels the power of the dancers' body, while his distinctive attribute, the single arm, is the symbol of the same inescapable defeat in front of a world that crushes those who are unarmed and powerless – Untouchable men who cannot be touched by Touchable women, and traditional dancers who have become "condemned goods", derided by their children and mocked by tourists' "nakedness" and "imported attention spans" (*T.G.S.T.* 230-1). In Ammu's dream, the God of Small Things holds her close:

> She could have touched his body lightly with her fingers, and felt his stomach skin turn to gooseflesh. She could have let her fingers stray to the base of his flat stomach. Carelessly, over those burnished chocolate ridges. And left patterned trails of bumpy gooseflesh on his body. (*T.G.S.T.* 215)

The passage brings back the image of Velutha's goose bumps under the policemen's handcuffs evoked in the closing of the performance, and yet, the desire embodied in Ammu's fingers seems capable here to transform it into a healing image of pleasure. "She could so easily have done that, but she didn't" (*T.G.S.T.* 215): thus, the suspended movement of her touch, as well as the static description of the dance-performance, draw around both Velutha and the Kathakali dancers a space of possible and yet unreachable healing.

After having brought the trauma narrative to its tragic conclusions, the unreachable space of healing built through the net of multimodal images connecting the Kathakali performance to Velutha's

godlike nature is unexpectedly opened up by the novel's ending, which takes us back to the beginning of the story, before the main traumatic experiences that have shattered the characters' lives. "The structure of the book", said Roy,

> ambushes the story – by that I mean that the novel ends more or less in the middle of the story, and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends with the word tomorrow. (Mullaney 2002, 56)

It is what we would call a "plot twist", a metaphor suggesting

> that a surprising revelation of narrative information traces a quasi-circular pattern, as if the recipient of the narrative were, quite literally, 'plotting' the plot. (Caracciolo 2014, 55)

Beyond "the linguistic surface of plot's embodied metaphors", argues Caracciolo, discursive patterns can "take on rhythmic qualities", building the readers' understanding of narrative structures "on more basic, physical modes of engagement with the world" (56). The complex and much discussed response aroused by the novel's ending depends indeed, I believe, on the conflict produced by the conceptual awareness of a plot twist that seems artfully intended to mitigate the narrative of trauma's destructive impact and the spontaneous response elicited by the embodied images of healing.

Described throughout the novel only through an external and critical point of view, Velutha and Ammu's forbidden relationship is now presented through the affective focalization on the lovers' experience of their first night together. In this last scattered piece of the story, useless for the simple purposes of reconstructing the fragmented narrative but crucial to the reader's emotional response, we are taken back to the night following Ammu's dream of Velutha as the God of Small Things: she "suddenly rose from her chair and walked out of her world like a witch. To a happier, better place" (*T.G.S.T.* 332), towards the bank of the river on the other side of the House of History, where nothing terrible has happened yet. Here, once again, Velutha emerges from the water as a god, emanated from the natural environment to which he seems to organically belong:

> As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. (333-4)

Intimately connected to the "small things" of nature, the humble carpenter's body reveals to Ammu's gaze the godlike "quality of his

Il Tolomeo
24, 2022, 41-60
e-ISSN 2499-5975

beauty", shaped by the same wood to which his extraordinary craftmanship gives shape (234). Finally, the suspended movements of the Kathakali performance and of Ammu's dream come to life within a long, detailed erotic scene, where every sensory perception is embodied into the characters' love-making movements, explicitly assimilated to a dance capable to bring them beyond terror and trauma:

> Biology designed the dance. Terror timed it. Dictated the rhythm with which their bodies answered to each other. As though they knew already that for each tremor of pleasure they would pay with an equal measure of pain. [...] So they held back. Tormented each other. Gave of each other slowly. [...] Once he was inside her, fear was derailed and biology took over. Clouded eyes held clouded eyes in a steady gaze and a luminous woman gave herself to a luminous man. [...] He kissed her eyes. Her ears. Her breasts. Her belly. Her seven silver stretchmarks from her twins. The line down that that led from her navel to her dark triangle, that told him where she wanted him to go. The inside of her legs, where her skin was softest. The carpenter's hands lifted her hips and an untouchable tongue touched the innermost part of her. Drank long and deep from the bowl of her. She danced for him. On that boat-shaped piece of earth. She lived. (335-7)

Like the Kathakali men in the temple, "dancing as though they couldn't stop" (234), Ammu and Velutha make love as though they couldn't stop, transfigured into the characters of one of the *Mahabaratha*'s stories where, as it was narrated in the dance-performance episode, a beautiful woman gave herself to a "shimmering young god" by whose beauty she had been bewitched (232). Here, where the lovers' touching is perceptibly made available to the reader, the writing seems to embrace the epic narrative of the "Great Stories" performed by the Kathakali dancers,[2] "stories of the gods" whose "yarn is spun from the ungodly, human heart" (209, 210). "Amputated" by the performances at the "Gods' Own Country" hotel, these stories were healed and revived by the nightly Kathakali performance in the temple, where they had become the dancer's "safety net": "all he has to keep him from crushing though the world like a falling stone", "the vessel into which he pours himself", that "gives him shape" and

2 Alex Tickell shows that "Roy's definition of the 'Great Stories' actually operates as an umbrella term for various composite or 'threaded' forms of epic and mythical narratives", offering a "sense of generic fluidity" that is echoed in the novel by the presence of various godlike figures, the most relevant of whom is undoubtedly the figure of Velutha as the "God of Small Things" (Tickell 2007, 157). Tickell suggests that Roy "emulates some of the 'Great Stories' effects" (166): the most remarkable occurrence of this "emulation" is in fact to be found, I believe, in the novel's conclusion.

"contains him. His Love. His Madness. His Hope" (231). However, it is only in those last pages of the novel, through Ammu and Velutha's love-making, that the "Great Stories" finally find the bodily movements capable of conveying to the reader the sense of being physically present in a redeeming space of healing. It is an ephemeral space, where the images of the dancers and the lovers' bodies meet: a space of "small things" that, for a brief lapse of time, saves us from the History's heart of darkness and then closes again, giving back the Kathakali Men to their abjection and despair, Ammu and Velutha to their lonely deaths, and the twins to their shared inescapable trauma. And yet, the novel's last word is indeed "Tomorrow", "*Naaley*", the "one small promise" (339) that since that first night the lovers exchanged each time they parted, blurring one more time the chronological sequence of the events: not to convey trauma this time, but to offer instead a space of healing that, though definitively closed to the characters, remains open to the readers.

4 Conclusions

The immersive reading elicited by multimodal mental images necessarily "entails a sense of medium transparency": "In the instant of experiencing enactment-imagery", stresses Kužmičová, "the reader-imager comes as close as one possibly can to forgetting that the experience was in fact mediated by a string of words on a page" (2014, 283). This is what makes Roy's narrative so effective in directly conveying to the reader the experience of Estha's abuse. However, if the reader "forgets" that his experience is mediated by a string of words on a page, all the more so he does not perceive the material peculiarity of the medium evoked by the intermedial narrative. This is what happens in the narrative of the filmic experience preceding Estha's abuse, where the sensory tracks specifically connected to the film's expressive power are integrated into the broader multimodal imagery provided by a text which functions as a "mental equivalent of a multimedia construct" (Ryan 2004, 12).

The intermedial references contained in the two episodes seem instead particularly relevant insofar as they signal the passage from the 'skyblue' space of the twins' childhood towards their post-traumatic emotional numbness, and from that numbness towards a space of healing. As we have seen, both in the second part of the filmic narrative, after Estha's abuse, and in the episode of the dance-performance, the enactive sensorimotor experience that the two media would normally arouse are voluntarily nullified by the narrative, together with its own multimodal resources. In both episodes, the reference to other media thus becomes paradoxically perceptible only at the very moment when the media summoned by the novel lose their expressive power.

Intermediality contributes therefore to shape trauma as an experience of loss, conveyed to the reader through an unexpected disconnection from the emotional flow of multimedia mental images. On the other hand, however, the intermedial references also contribute to the shaping of a double mythical space of origins – the "skyblue" childhood before the trauma in the first part of the filmic experience, and the love-making images that close the novel, bringing to life the stillness of the dance-performance and transforming the past from before the trauma into an affective image of the future. In this sense, intermediality intervenes to mark the circular pattern of a narrative in which the brutal violence of trauma coexists with the desire for healing: the "God of Loss" is also the "God of Small Things", and the images of Velutha's body in the space of the love-making dance do not mitigate, but spontaneously redeem, those of his butchered body, of Estha's soiled "Other Hand", and of the whole "martyrology of the abject" reiterated throughout the novel.

Bibliography

Atkinson, M.; Richardson M. (2013). *Trauma Affect*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Baneth-Nouailhetas, E. (2002). *"The God of Small Things": Arundhati Roy*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Caracciolo, M. (2014). "Tell-Tale Rhythms: Embodiment and Narrative Discourse". *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 6(2), 49-73. https://doi.org/10.5250/storyworlds.6.2.0049.

Colm Hogan, P. (2010). "A Passion for Plot: Prolegomena to Affective Narratology". *Symplokē*, 18(1-2), 65-81. https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.18.1-2.0065.

Dancygier, B. (2007). "Narrative Anchors and the Processes of Story Construction: The Case of Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*". *Style*, 41(2), 133-51.

Fox, L.C. (2002). "A Martyrology of the Abject: Witnessing and Trauma in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'". *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 33(3-4), 35-60.

Mullaney, J. (2002). *Arundhati Roy's "The God of the Small Things": A Reader's Guide*. London; New York: Continuum.

Outka, E. (2011). "Trauma and Temporal Hybridity in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'". *Contemporary Literature*, 52(1), 21-53.

Patoine, P.-L. (2019). "Representation and Immersion. The Embodied Meaning of Literature". *Gestalt Theory*, 41(2), 201-15. https://doi.org/10.2478/gth-2019-0019.

Kuzmičova, A. (2012). "Presence in the Reading of Literary Narrative: A Case for Motor Enactment". *Semiotica*, 189(1-4), 23-48. https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.2011.071.

Kuzmičova, A. (2014). "Literary Narrative and Mental Imagery: A View from Embodied Cognition". *Style*, 48(3), 275-93.

Ryan, M.-L. (2004). "Introduction". Ryan, M.-L. (ed.), *Narrative Across Media. The Languages of Storytelling*. Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1-40.
Rokotnitz, N. (2017). "Goosebumps, Shivers, Visualization, and Embodied Resonance in the Reading Experience: 'The God of the Small Things'". *Poetics Today*, 382, 273-93. https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-3868603.
Roy, A. [1997] (2017). *The God of Small Things*. London: Harper Collins.
Seeley, W.P. (2018). "Neuroscience, Narrative, and Emotion Regulation". Kurtz, R. (ed.), *Trauma and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 153-66. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316817155.012.
Sharma A. (1998). "Truths of Memory and Transgression: 'The God of Small Things'". *India International Centre Quarterly*, 25(1), 168-71.
Tickell A. (2007). "'The Epic Side of Truth': Storytelling and Performance in 'The God of Small Things'". Tickell, A. (ed.), *Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'*. London; New York: Routledge, 155-66. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203004593.