The Meenachal River as Vital Materiality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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1. Introduction

Post-independence Indian English fiction constitutes an important part of world literature today and women novelists have made significant contributions to this genre. After a tradition of writing centered around the new nation and its making, over the last two decades, a shift in focus can be observed in the literary production of Indian women authors. Unlike their male counterparts, whose main concern is the nation's history or its shadow in the contemporary (as is evident, for instance, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, in which Thama's story is itself the story of Partition), Indian English women writers consider the nation as "an invisible other to the lives they write about" (Dutta 2013: 151). As a consequence, they tend to explore the effects of large political structures – such as patriarchy, caste segregation, gender discrimination, etc. – on individual lives. In other words, they recognize that big themes are inextricably linked to local issues, thus using the locale as a means for addressing regional, national, and transnational contradictions. Hence, they choose to foreground the world inhabited by the people living at the margins of society and the micro-activities they perform in their daily lives. In this respect, the publication of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (hereafter *TGST*) in

1997 marks a watershed in Indian literary production.

Roy – the first South-Asian woman to win the Booker Prize for fiction – interrupts a long male tradition of post-independence narrative focused on important social and political themes relating to the formation of the new nation-state. As Bill Ashcroft has observed in his essay, "Re-writing India", Roy's fiction subverts the grand narrative of the nation rejecting the epic scale of previous novels "in favour of a story of small people" (2013: 35) whose lives are overturned by small things that take on an enormous significance. By listening to the myriad of small voices in Indian society, Roy has adopted a postcolonial approach to History according to which "it is by reading the silences in the interstices of the grand narrative of History that the stories that make up the nation can be recovered" (*ibidem*). The setting chosen by Roy – a small village in her home-state of Kerala – is a clear demonstration of this shift in focus from big metropoles like Bombay – in which, for instance, some of the main novels by Salman Rushdie are set – to small villages and the small lives that populate them. The story of a Syrian-Christian family from Ayemenem becomes the allegory of corruption and the patriarchal mentality of the whole sub-continent. The village is a political allegory of the newly formed nation-state of India and includes all the elements of the postcolonial dilemma. David Damrosh, in the video "Invitation to World Literatures: *The God of Small Things*" (online), for instance, has defined Roy as a "glocal writer", both global and local, that is, engaged with a grand story grounded in local details, small things. Through this approach, which Julie Mullaney has defined "archaeological" (2002: 32), Roy reconstructs History by putting together small stories, in a constant tension between small and large, private and public, present and past.

Given the numerous references to India's postcolonial history as well as the complex and convoluted temporal structure of the narrative, which parallels that of the *kathakali* mythological narrations[1], Roy's novel has been mainly examined from the

[1] The *kathakali* dance-drama is a form of epic tale, typical of Kerala, dating back to the seventeenth century during which the actors, through dance and hand gestures, engage in performances which can last for hours, usually from nine or ten at night until dawn. Ancient Indian epics are told in an alternation of dance and vocal or musical elements without rigidly respecting the precise order of the

point of view of time. Mullaney, for instance, comments on the novel's structure which defies linearity and manipulates chronology, like the Indian type of storytelling (*ibid*.: 53). She has also reflected on the split between the order of narrative and the order of the events it describes by examining the return journeys that populate the story not much in terms of space but of time. In the same vein, Pier Paolo Piciucco's analysis of Roy's fictional technique mainly tackles the homecoming theme – central in the novel – from the point of view of time, as a backward travel in chronological terms (2012: 325). Similarly, C. J. Davees, in his essay, "Design in *The God of Small Things*", deals with the various kinds of "reversals" of the story as experiences of return of the characters back in time (2012: 329-330). Memory is thoroughly examined also by Murari Prasad who investigates what is "under the skin of the narrative" (2006: 17) as a series of fragments of memories. Indeed, the novel moves back and forth two brief time periods in the life of three generations of the Ipe family, members of the Syrian Christian élite: thirteen days before catastrophe in December of 1969 and one day in June of 1992, when the youngest generation, the twins Rahel and Estha, are reunited for the first time in 23 years. The catastrophe, which changes the lives of all the characters, are the deaths, both occurring on the same day, of both the little English cousin Sophie Mol, who accidentally drowns in the dangerous waters of the Meenachal River, and of the untouchable Velutha, who crosses the river every night to meet secretly the touchable mother of the twin protagonists. The mother's aunt – the most evil character of the book – denounces him as rapist and children's kidnapper in order to save family from scandal and, as a result, the police capture and beat him to death on the other side of the river. After these tragic events, the twins' mother is repudiated by the family and dies few months later while the twins are separated for 23 years. The events of 1969 are thirteen days of doom that leave the children emotionally frozen in time. The day of remembrance in 1992, told from the point of view of adult Rahel (the woman twin), shifts from present to past and is marked by a series of memories retrieved by the evocative presence of the

plot, the chronological sequence of the events, or time limits.

Meenachal.

In spite of the fascinating organization of the novel in terms of time sequences and layers, in this article I argue that the full potential of the book is actually expressed through space as the narrative is set in motion by a concatenation of spatially-oriented memories. In other words, rather than relying on time, the narrative moves around locations which engender different fragments of events. Susan Stanford Friedman, in her essay, "Spatial Poetics and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" (2005), has examined some of the main buildings which bring into focus the social, cultural, and political systems presented in the novel. I believe, however, that another space, belonging to the natural world, also deserves special attention: the Meenachal River. As the core around which the narrative unfolds, the river is the catalyst of narration in both the past – as the place where transgressions, encounters, and tragic events occurred – and the present – when a walk along the riverbank triggers memories and an unconscious re-evaluation of past traumas.

Focusing on the spatial context of the novel, I will deal with the Meenachal River as vital materiality enacting the confrontation between opposed forces and instantiating the psychological journeys of characters. After examining its role as both container of ideologies and material representation of psychic evolution, I will conclude that the river can be read as "metonymic metaphor" by reason of its relationship of contiguity and similarity with the protagonists of the book. By showing how an inanimate element is far from a static or passive presence in the narrative but a generative force, I aim at foregrounding the active role of nonhuman entities in shaping people's identity. Therefore, my analysis will follow a non-anthropocentric approach and will be supported by the principles of "Material Engagement Theory" (Malafouris 2013), which highlights the fundamental role of things in human cognition.

2. The vitality of the material world

By foregrounding the river as propellant of action and reflection, Roy's novel defies

the Cartesian vision of reality, according to which an artificial line divides people from things as if they were two conflicting and incompatible entities. For this reason, I believe that the novel's true potential can be examined from the perspective of Material Engagement Theory, which challenges this dualistic approach and is based on the presumption of inseparability between thought, action, and material things. In other words, its argument – elaborated by the French philosopher, semiotician of material culture, and archeologist of the mind Lambros Malafouris – is that things play a fundamental role in the process of human cognition and the mind cannot be separated from the body or material culture[2]. Indeed, thinking is embedded in situated action and material contexts. Therefore, in the cognitive landscape, brains, bodies, and things have equal roles. The anthropologist of material culture Daniel Miller, for instance, has claimed that we constantly think through things and engage with them, but are rarely aware of the action potential of this engagement in shaping our minds (2010). Indeed, we are so used to the presence of things around us that we do not tend to think of them as powerful tools for our cognitive development. They often go unnoticed, so much so that Miller talks about "humility of things" (*ibid.*: 50). However, their presence is so pervasive in our everyday lives that an ongoing dialectic occurs between humans and things, to the extent that humans make things and things, in return, make us who or what we are. The sociologist Bruno Latour has also recognized that "there is no sense in which the notion of a human can be disentangled from the nonhumans into whose fate it has woven more and more intimately over the ages" (1994: 794). It is from this perspective that it may be claimed that minds, bodies, and things form an inseparable analytic unit.

The active role of things in the development of the human species is demonstrated by the fact that humans, unlike any other species, are capable of signification and symbolization. As a result, as Chris Tilley has claimed, things can be considered as "material metaphors" which, unlike words, "[do] not just communicat[e] meaning but actively [do] something in the world as mediators of activity" (1999: 265). Things

[2] Malafouris uses the term "material culture" to refer to things, artifacts, materials, objects, and material signs.

bring people together and provide channels of interaction, thus becoming what Malafouris calls “vital materiality” (2013: 44). According to this non-anthropocentric perspective, agency is not only a human property as it can also be attributed to the material world as something active with which humans engage and interact. Things, indeed, have a strong evocative power which makes them our “emotional companions” and “intellectual anchors” (Turkle 2007). In other words, they are signs which act at the non-discursive level as concrete exemplars of our emotions, thoughts, and feelings. These physical signs are not merely signifiers of a signified, but also shape our social and cognitive universe, providing a stimulus for meaning and communication between humans. As Malafouris points out, they “enact and bring forth the world” (2013: 99). Therefore, the material agency of things gives them causal efficacy, that is, they are responsible for things to happen. More specifically, they are responsible for that which happens within a hybrid lived space – created through the linkages of cognition and material culture – “at the intersection of personal, peripersonal, and extrapersonal space” (*ibid.*: 245).

The river in *TGST*, for instance, is a highly complex hybrid space both literally and metaphorically as well as being a material entity with a capacity for action and meaning. As the core of all the main events in the book, the Meenachal is a border, a threshold repeatedly crossed and re-crossed, and a fundamental network of relationships. It is interesting to note that the region in which this river flows and the novel is set – Kerala – is the emblem of encounters and fluid borders. Located at the southwestern tip of India, Kerala has been a historical meeting point of different cultures. As Arundhati Roy said to David Barsamian in an interview in 2009, “[Kerala] is home to four of the world’s great religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Marxism” (413). Moreover, Kerala prides itself on its rates of literacy, network of social welfare programs, strong labor movement, and the status of its women – all among the best examples in India. It is also distinctive for its relatively large Christian population – about 20 per cent – which has historically constituted the élite of the region. In the novel, Roy uses this locale as a metonym of post-Empire India, i.e., a heterogeneous space in which conflicting sets of norms and distinctions exist. Kerala is the place where ancient Hindu traditions coexist with the Syrian Christian culture,

dating back to the fourth century, as well as with the colonial cultural heritage and the communist ideology from the nineteenth century. Like India, Kerala is a transcultural palimpsest of different traditions and heterogeneous local and global relationships. Probably, it is because of its backwaters that this region appears to be constantly on the move, related to numerous intercultural spaces and, at the same time, divided by countless boundaries, both in the novel and in real life.

The backwaters are a distinctive feature of Kerala. They are a network of rivers, lakes, artificial and natural canals, and estuaries that run between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, from the city of Kolham to Kochi. The backwaters are an invaluable resource for the population of the region as they are regularly used for fishing, transportation, and agriculture. They undoubtedly facilitate the encounter and mixing of cultures, but they also multiply the boundaries that construct and identify an individual. Indeed, Roy depicts Kerala as a state in which lines entrap people and cannot be crossed, either literally or symbolically. At the beginning of the first chapter, anticipating some of the events concerning the main characters, the author writes: “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks, and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons” (Roy 2017: 5). Not surprisingly, Roy has chosen a watercourse as the main concretization of these borders. The Meenachal is the backwaters’ most powerful resident, flowing through Kottayam district, and is at the heart of the activities of the Ayemenem population. It is a powerful social network wherein nonhuman actors play a vital role in marking human time and recording events that bind communities together. In the novel, the river is represented as an “ecological collectivity”, to use Aarti Vadde’s expression (2009: 522), in which bonds among humans are reflected in bonds across humans, animals, and vegetation, whose interaction triggers the whole story. Therefore, in *TGST*, space is not a static or passive presence, but rather a generative force, “active, mobile, and full” (Friedman 2005: 3251). As Malafouris has argued, “humans are spatially located creatures” (2013: 67). This means that space is not merely the backdrop against which human lives unfold, but it also plays a fundamental role in the way we shape our subjectivities and interact with the world.

In literature, space has often been commented on as the “description” which

interrupts the flow of events or the “setting” which functions as background to the plot. However, in *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti claims that mapping the locations of novels helps to identify “how space gives rise to a story, a plot” (1998: 7). He also writes that “[g]eography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history ‘happens,’ but an active force that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth" (3). As an integral part of narration, it may be claimed that space enacts encounters, exchanges, and interactions between people and things. It is from this perspective that, in the next section, I will analyze the Meenachal as an example of the interplay of location and action as well as a place in which opposed forces meet, interact, and influence each other both on a literal and symbolic level.

3. The contact zone of the Meenachal River

The active role of space in Roy’s novel is powerfully represented by the river around which the characters’ lives unfold and whose presence affects deeply their destinies. In her fiction, the author explores the potential of a location which has had a significant impact on Kerala and its population, both from a geographic and historical point of view. Indeed, the Meenachal is not only the lifeblood of the region, but, on a symbolic level, it is also a liminal space which, by its very nature, enables contacts and crossings. This characteristic makes it a “contact zone”, that is, “[a] space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (Pratt 2008 [1992]: 8). Marie Louise Pratt explains, further, that such a contact zone is “an attempt to provoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect” (*ibid.*: 7). Hence, centered around the “contact” perspective, the space discussed by Pratt emphasizes how “subjects get constituted in and by relations to each other”, thus treating encounters between different entities not in terms of separateness but of “co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices” (*ibid*.: 8). In this respect, the Meenachal River might be considered as a site in which opposing forces meet and confront one other. From a literal point of view, in the Meenachal, the fresh water of

the river mixes with the salt water of the Arabian Sea. Science demonstrates that when fresh water and salt water meet in an estuary, they do not always mix readily. Because the fresh water flowing into the estuary is less salty and less dense than the water from the sea, it often floats on top of the heavier sea water. This encounter between these two different types of water creates turbulence and several conditions need to be met for a harmonious balance (such as a certain direction and speed of the wind, a specific tidal range, etc.). The Meenachal's direct connection with the sea (which, in turn, merges with the Indian Ocean) makes it possible for the local communities living along it to be joined to the rest of the world. From a figurative point of view, the river is a natural boundary in which the banks simultaneously connect and separate opposing entities. On the one hand, on the riverbanks, encounters between touchables and untouchables, laws of love and laws of tradition, East and West are possible. On the other hand, however, Roy's story demonstrates that the communication and exchanges enabled by the river actually amplify the polarities around which Indian society is built. Despite being the place where people at the margins of society – such as a divorced young woman, twins born from an inter-faith marriage, and an untouchable young man – find shelter from the rigid caste and gender laws, the border space of the river generates and shapes stories of division and discrimination.

Looking at the unifying potential of the river, the first example that comes to mind is the strong affective bond that develops between the touchable twins and their mother and the untouchable Velutha. On the riverbanks, the twins play every day with Velutha, who

> lived in a little laterite hut, downriver from the Ayemenem house. [...] [Estha and Rahel] would sit with him for hours. [...] He was teaching them to use a planer. [...] It was Velutha who made Rahel her luckiest-ever fishing rod and taught her and Estha to fish. (Roy 2017: 75)

From the children's point of view, the river is a playground as well as a wonderful place which they long for whenever they feel lonely, abandoned, or out of place. A case in point is when they are in a motel room, near the airport of Cochin, the night before their English cousin is due to arrive. The whole family's attention is focused

on the arrival of the little girl and the twins unconsciously feel excluded from the circle of familial protection and affection. In that unfamiliar place, pervaded by unpleasant smells and squalid furniture, the only thing that makes them feel better is the thought of their river:

> They dreamed of the river. Of the coconut trees that bent into it and watched, with coconut eyes, the boat slide by. Upstream in the mornings. Downstream in the evenings. [...] It was warm, the water. Graygreen. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it. (*Ibid.*: 116-117)

In that heavenly place, nobody cares about caste or gender differences as nature prevails over culture and tradition. The opposition between nature and culture is weakened by the waters of the Meenachal. Indeed, the downtrodden characters that live in symbiosis with the river, namely the twins, their mother, and Velutha, have the opportunity to go back to a natural state, protected from the influence of any superstructure. The descriptions of the prosperous vegetation, the heavy rains which make flowers bloom, the hundreds of small lives which populate the river and its surroundings suggest that, there, life prevails and is expressed in all its forms, without any limit.

The river is also the place where, on thirteen consecutive nights, the twins' mother secretly meets Velutha to touch him and be touched by him. Their love, free from any social or religious constraint, takes shape on the Meenachal's riverbanks. By crossing the river, they are symbolically crossing the lines imposed by society, that is, the borders which delimit the categories of class and caste. The water of the river blurs these limits and connects two closed-off worlds. The woman and the man's needs are satisfied, not so much in physical terms as in affective terms. Indeed, as a divorced woman, she does not have a "Locusts stand I" (*ibid.*: 56) – as the twins understand the Latin expression "locus standi" – neither in society, nor within her family. Hence, the river is the only place where she feels at one with the world that surrounds her, in peace with her small town (and its traditions), and part of a natural environment in which small lives also have the right to exist: "She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked

cigarettes and had midnight swims" (*ibid.*: 43). Along the river, she can find solace as if water could soothe her "liquid ache" (*ibidem*). The adjective "liquid" gives an idea of the shapeless pain suffered by a person whose identity is not defined within Indian society. Similarly, Velutha's broken identity, as an untouchable, seems to take on a new shape near the river. His midnight swims can be interpreted as a sort of purification rite he performs daily in order to clean his body of the dirt attributed to him by society. Born impure and polluted for the Hindu religion, he embodies the filth of India. In Julia Kristeva's terms, he represents the abject, that is, somebody to be kept at a safe distance, cast away, and outside of the boundaries of civil society (1982: 2). The natural setting of the river helps him to connect with his real self, independently of any cultural bias. In the river, he can feel safe and free from the category into which he was placed before birth, which wants him dirty, untouchable, and polluted. A representative scene illustrates this concept very well. As soon as Velutha understands that no one in the community is going to support his love for a touchable woman, he feels a visceral need to plunge into the river, as if returning to the womb:

> Naked [...] he walked down the thirteen stone steps into the water and further, until the river was chest high. Then he began to swim with easy powerful strokes, striking out towards where the current was swift and certain, where the Really Deep began. The moonlit river fell from his swimming arms like sleeves of silver. It took him only a few minutes to make the crossing. When he reached the other side, he emerged gleaming and pulled himself ashore, black as the night that surrounded him, black as the water he had crossed. (Roy 2017: 273-274)

The water of the river is like the amniotic fluid, from which he draws sustenance and comfort. There, in that totally natural environment, his untouchability loses its meaning. His action of entering the river, in a semi-conscious state, resembles a sort of baptism, returning him to a state of innocence and purity. For the two lovers, the water blends the opposition between love and the laws of love, which "lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (*ibid.*: 168), to the extent that it is simply biology which sets the rules of their union.

As the examples discussed above show, until a certain point of the story, the river is metonymy of freedom and unregulated bonds. It is the container of natural

connections and a place of self-expression and protection. Hence, between the river and the main characters there is metonymic relationship, that is, a relationship based on proximity and contiguity, as Samuel Porter Whitsitt also explains (2013: 21). In his book, *Metonymy, Synecdoche, and the Disorders of Contiguity*, Whitsitt argues that, being typically expressed by a container/contained relation – and therefore an arbitrary relation – metonymy is the trope represented by doubleness, or in his words, "the two that can never be reduced to one" (*ibid.*: 29). By reason of the irreducible difference on which they are based, metonymic relations embody freedom and resistance against assimilation and uniformity. Similarly, in the river, the marginalized protagonists of the novel find their space of choice, unbiased expression of their identity, and resistance against those who want them to follow the homogenizing rules of society.

However, unlike Indian tradition, which is represented as immutable and permanent, the river changes with the tides and seasons, flowing at different paces at different times, with invisible currents. As a consequence, as the story progresses, its relationship with the characters also changes: from life container to cause of death, from metonymy of freedom to metaphor of corruption. As Roman Jakobson argued in his essay, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles" (2003 [1956]), metaphor is the trope of similarity, and consequently, metaphoric relationships are based on a kind of analogical bond between two elements (42). If we look at the mutable face of the river, for instance, it is clear how its change parallels that of the Ipe family and the entire community of Ayemenem. The more corruption and indifference spread among its inhabitants, the more the river changes its nature. As a result, its relationship of proximity with its inhabitants – which would make it a metonymy – transforms into a relationship of similarity – which eventually makes it a metaphor.

The first dramatic episode that demonstrates this is the death by drowning of the 10-year-old English cousin, Sophie Mol, as anticipated above. Although the river has always been a friend to the children playing along its banks, it is unpredictable, just like the members of the local community. The change starts to become visible when the children are about to cross the river to reach the History House, an ancient colonial building located on the opposite riverbank: "Three children on the riverbank.

[...] The river itself was dark and quiet. An absence rather than a presence, betraying no sign of how high and strong it really was" (Roy 2017: 273). The words of Velutha's brother, aimed at warning the twins about the unreliable "character" of the river, sound like a tragic premonition: "You must be careful, [...]. This river of ours – she isn't always what she pretends to be" (*ibid.:* 201). He tells the twins that the first third of the river can be trusted, but one never knows what will happen in the rest. Indeed, while the twins are trying to cross the river, together with their young cousin, the current overturns their boat, killing the English girl. The twins will soon discover that people, even those they think they can fully trust, like family members, are as treacherous as the river. The unpredictable part of the river represents the dark side of their nature that all people hide from others.

Later, the riverbank, instead of protecting Velutha by concealing his footprints, guides the policemen searching for him after he has been accused by the twins' great-aunt of raping her touchable niece (the twins' mother) and kidnapping the children. The purpose of these lies is to save the family honor since the relationship between Velutha and the twins' mother has become public. The crossing of the river by the policemen is highly symbolic as they use what had been a means of transgression as a way to restore boundaries and limits: "[A] posse of Touchable Policemen crossed the Meenachal River, sluggish and swollen with recent rain, and picked their way through the wet undergrowth, the clink of handcuffs in someone's heavy pocket" (*ibid.:* 288). Moreover, this place, which was previously so welcoming for people at the margins of society, now becomes a site of risk and violence. Near the riverbank, while Velutha is sleeping, completely unaware the police are searching for him, history prevails over humanity, tradition over nature, separation over connection. The policemen beat brutally the young man in front of the astonished eyes of the twins, who are there resting after surviving the dangerous river crossing the night before. The barbarity hidden behind the policemen's act, which recalls the cold and calculating attitude of perpetrators of genocides, is represented by the emotional detachment from what they are doing.

> The men were history's henchmen. Sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke its laws. Impelled by feelings that were primal yet

> paradoxically wholly impersonal. Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear – civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness. [...] Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify. (*Ibid.*: 292)

The river has gradually become an enemy for its most affectionate residents – both human and nonhuman – who can no longer trust it.

The river also reveals its Janus-faced nature in the present. When Rahel, the twin girl, comes back to Ayemenem 23 years later, the first thing she is confronted with is the decaying river. Roy personifies it as an elderly moribund person on a hospital bed: "[I]t greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed" (*ibid.*: 118). Although it was June and it was raining, "the river was no more than a swollen drain now" (*ibidem*). As a result of globalization, the river has been transformed from a playground into a cesspool, smelling of "shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans", in which "[m]ost fish had died" (*ibid.:* 14). Downriver, a saltwater barrage has been built "in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby" (*ibid.:* 118). This devastation is a symbol of economic, social, and ecological failure, which is reflected in the river. The river also reflects the shadow of a luxury hotel, built where the History House used to stand. This place, for instance, can no longer be approached by the river since developers have fractured the backwater sphere by building dams between the hotel and the Meenachal. The narrator observes that tourists "arrived by speedboat, opening up a *V* of foam on the water, leaving behind a rainbow film of gasoline" (*ibid.:* 119). The transnational corporate tourism has destroyed not only the landscape, but also the local culture. Indeed, the *kathakali* dancers now perform a shortened version of the Indian epic near the swimming pool – because "no swimming" signs warn people from getting near the polluted river – while tourists drink cocktails and sunbathe. Their job has totally lost its aura of magic and is now used merely to add a little exotic flavor to the holidays of Westerners. In conclusion, the waters of the Meenachal, thick and toxic with pesticides, now collect the awful consequences of globalization.

In an analogical way, the progressive desecration of the river parallels the

psychological journey of the characters towards solitude and perdition, emptiness and silence. As children, for instance, the twins used to spend their days along the river full of joy and optimism. The riverbanks were their playground, which they shared with fish, trees, insects, spiders, stones, the mud, and even the moon reflected in the water in a sort of joyful dance. Paradoxically, however, the river is responsible for the ending of their innocence. It is because of the river and the death it caused that "childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt" (*ibid.:* 303). As a result, when the grown-up twins go back to Ayemenem after 23 years, along the ravaged riverbanks of the Meenachal, they, too, are devastated, incapable of joy or trust in others. Rahel's reflection near the river in the present time shows clearly how their identities have been torn apart by the events of the past. The narrator gives voice to her thoughts and explains:

> In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, […] Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. […] And now she thinks of Estha and Rahel as *Them*, because, separately, the two of them are no longer what *They* were or ever thought *They*'d be. (*Ibid*.: 4-5)

The unity that characterized them and made them an inseparable whole has been replaced by loneliness and abandonment. And their beloved river, which used to connect them to each other and to the place they lived in, is now a place of separation and sad decay. The adult twins' tainted lives are reflected on the adulterated cleanliness and compromised fluidity of the river. As a result, the twins' incestuous encounter, or to use Pratt's concept, their unnatural contact, revealed at the end of the book, is the only possible outcome after an unnatural separation and years spent as ghosts, with split selves. After a walk along the contact zone of the river, they finally identify with one another again and find a way to fill each other's missing part. One more time, then, the river contributes to the dismantling of boundaries and the triumph of diversity. In this respect, I would push further the thesis sustained in the article "Ecocritical Perspective of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" (Kunhi and Kunhi 2017) according to which the river is a metaphor for Ammu, the rebel twins' mother. I would suggest that the twins are also analogous

to the river for their powerful undercurrents and dormancy.

Adults, namely the twins' mother and Velutha, have the same twofold relationship with the river. They choose the river as the site in which to start and live their forbidden love. Although they are perfectly aware of the risks, they choose freedom over rules, emancipation over obedience. At the beginning, the river is complicit in their union. They cross it in darkness with a boat and the wildlife surrounding them seems to facilitate their secret encounters. The young woman knows that this is the only way she can assert her will and lay the ground for her own happiness. Indeed, after the epiphanic moment in which her eyes meet Velutha's eyes in an unusual, more intimate way, she is first to act and goes to meet him at the river:

> She knew the path to the river as well as her children did and could have found her way there blindfolded. [...] She didn't know what it was that made her hurry through the undergrowth. [...] That made her arrive on the banks of the Meenachal breathless. [...] As though her life depended on getting there in time. (*Ibid.:* 314)

Her behavior suggests that she has changed – consciously or not – her attitude towards life and has become the master of her own destiny. Her psychic development from obedient woman to rebel parallels Velutha's change. The night of their first encounter, for instance, the young man goes swimming hoping to meet her: "He [...] began to swim. Upstream. Against the current. He turned towards the bank. [...] When he saw her the detonation almost drowned him. It took all his strength to stay afloat. He trod water, standing in the middle of the dark river" (*ibid.:* 315). His swimming upstream, against the current, to reach the riverbank where the woman is waiting for him is another clue to his desire to defy social constraints. However, as Roy implies many times throughout the novel, the only possible consequence for breaking thousand-year-old laws is to be carried away by the current. The deaths of both Velutha – violently beaten and treated like a dog – and the twins' mother – who ironically dies of suffocation in a squalid motel room – demonstrates how individual choices are often overcome by superior forces which put things back into place in one way or another. Here, too, the river identifies with the sufferings of its people. Like them, it is a place out of control until it is dammed to keep out salt water and

use fresh water for rice paddies. The damming represents limitation of movement, an obstruction of vital processes which reflects the experiences of the marginalized characters. The river's change over the years instantiates the characters' psychological journeys, which go from innocence to guilt, from joy to perdition, from life to death.

4. Conclusion

As vital materiality, the river has agency of its own and, by its very nature, allows transgressions and crossings. It is both a container and generator of history and, being a liminal, hybrid space, it offers an opportunity for people on the margins to develop their own way of thinking and living. Hence, given the deep relationship between the river and the lives around it, the Meenachal may be considered as a "mindscape" (Malafouris 2013: 227), that is, a cognitive landscape in which bodies, minds, and things are interrelated and shape each other. In other words, the river is the ideal location in which the ontological coalition between mind and matter, people and things, can take place. As a result, the characters' cognitive and emotional states or processes literally comprise elements in their surrounding material environment, namely the river. According to Malafouris' hypothesis of the extended mind, our mind goes well beyond the skin or the skull and literally extends into the extra-organismic environment. Therefore, our ways of thinking "are not merely causally dependent upon but *constituted by* extracranial bodily processes and material artifacts" (*ibidem*). Indeed, through the river characters can make sense of the world, feel, discover, but also find their way forward, for better or for worse. Despite the river ultimately symbolizing an eternal flux which overwhelms everyone and everything that tries to stop it, it remains a fluid border between apparently impermeable boundaries. Therefore, fluid bodies like those of the protagonists of the novel, deprived of any space in society, find their natural habitat in the river.

As my analysis has shown, the river is linked by both contiguity and similarity with the characters and the cultural context they inhabit, thus representing that which I

would call “metonymic metaphor”. Not only is it a container of ideas of freedom, resistance, and difference, but also a place in analogical relationship with the people and the atmosphere they live in. Moreover, as a hybrid material sign, it is not merely a conceptual abstraction, but physically enacts contamination and osmosis. This happens both literally and symbolically. On the one hand, East and West meet through the river, different cultures clash, and an interaction between modernity and tradition takes place. As the novel suggests, the outcome is quite tragic since, as a result of globalization, Indian culture is bound to become nothing more than an exotic performance, a tourist attraction. Furthermore, village inhabitants gradually lose respect for places like the river which have given them sustenance for centuries. Children defecate onto the riverbed, mothers wash clothes and pots, and people bathe themselves with soap. This is the painful reality depicted by Roy when she talks about the Meenachal:

> Once it had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying-flowers. (Roy 2017: 119)

Hence, the waterway literally allows the passage of contaminating entities which threaten both people and the environment, thus losing its status of ecological collectivity. On the other hand, however, from a symbolical perspective, the process of osmosis enacted by the river has been successful. From a scientific point of view, osmosis consists of the gradual transition of a liquid from one part to another through a membrane. As the analysis of psychological development of the main characters has shown, the upheaval they all undergo – which has brought loss of innocence, solitude, and death – gradually shifts their status from that of victims to that of heroes. Indeed, their change progressively becomes a form of resistance and struggle. The river has allowed the touchable and untouchable lovers’ transition from passivity to active choice as well as the twins’ passage from blindness to awareness, from split to whole selves.

In conclusion, the true potential of the river in Roy’s novel is expressed not so much literally as metaphorically. As “metonymic metaphor” of postcolonial India and its

inhabitants, rather than a landscape, it is a mindscape in which transgressions are enabled, borders are blurred, and communication between opposed forces is possible.

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