

Winning Graduate Research Paper

Madness and Notions of Gender within Alternative Spaces/Times in Mrs. Dalloway and The God of Small Things

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So we beat on, boats against the current,
borne back ceaselessly into the past.
—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Like a faulty gene, madness is passed down with increasing intensity and unpredictability. It does not fade, but incubates and continues to remind us of its perpetual presence. As it challenges the 'ordinary' and the mainstream, it brings creation, deviation, and change; its existence is not recognized unless experienced and will, perhaps, never be entirely understood.

Madness simultaneously results from and leads to the existence of marginalized entities that produce their own time/space, for such solitary temporalities are not permitted to exist in "linear time" (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981, p. 14). Only a present destined to a past tense, this existence is an essential part of history, which few will ever know or pass down. The marginalized find a desire to affirm their existence through literature, for this medium "reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret, and unconscious universe" (p. 25).

In madness, there is a defiance, a rebellious eruption against the 'conventional.' It is a condition of humankind, which often emerges on the margins and crawls into the 'ordinary' world only to be destroyed, or worse, disregarded.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (2009) illustrate how madness permits individuals to pursue unrequited love by placing them on the margins, giving them solitary experiences, and allowing them to create alternative temporalities. There is a beautiful vulnerability in this universal human condition (often labeled as madness), which surfaces when one acknowledges that a love will never be fulfilled. The boundary between madness and sanity dissipates as structures are challenged and lives are eternally changed. Through this process, voices are silenced and time moves backwards. Only the silenced voices alone understand and experience a 'true' form of existence, an existence for the sake of itself.

These voices often lead a “feminine” existence, for they are left out of history, abandoned in space and memories (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981, p. 14). The “feminine” (I would also add the ‘singular’ and the ‘marginal’) are often associated with space, and not with time (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981, p. 16). However, it is “feminism [which] reminds us of the forgotten, lost, or virtual history of the contributors of the ‘others’” (Grosz, 2004, p. 247). These silenced voices quietly erupt in a gendered space; when given the chance to temporalize, they will likely reveal insights about the essence of our human nature.

Marginal Temporalities in *The God of Small Things*

Living on the edge brings about a painful liberation. It is within such spaces and times that we come to learn that there are experiences that are ours alone. On the borders, one is able to experience solitude – the “reality which we all seize from within” by merely being our own person (Bergson, 1946, p. 191). To exist believing that others are like us brings comfort. Those who live on the margins find comfort in solitude; they recognize the duration of their being “flowing through time” (Bergson, 1946, p. 191). In their solitude, the characters defy social systems. By loving the ‘wrong’ person, by merely choosing an ‘atypical’ existence, they challenge conceptions of sexual identity and cross social boundaries. Consequently, the social forces of their own world doom them. Leaving no traces behind, they are left out of history.

Ammu and Velutha’s marginal existence challenges their social world in *The God of Small Things*. Ammu’s decision to create her own solitary experience instills feelings of unease in those around her. When her songs were played on the radio, the others were cautious of her. It was as though they were somehow aware that “she lived in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of their power, that a woman that they had already damned now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous” (Roy, 1997, p. 44). Similarly, Velutha’s simmering noiselessness constantly alarms his father, Vellya Paapen, who “couldn’t say what it was that frightened him ... It was not what he said, but the way he said it. Not what he did, but the way he did it ... the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel” (Roy, 1997, p. 76). Ammu and Velutha are condemned by society, for they ‘insensibly’ challenge norms, cross boundaries, and in doing so, create an alternative time/space. When one is already condemned, one is ready to sacrifice everything. Hence, this solitude, which isolates them, ironically permits them to ‘exist.’ Perhaps what makes Ammu and Velutha dangerous in the eyes of others is their decision to truly ‘be.’ Their marginal experiences challenge the status quo and condemn them.

Because Ammu, at the age of 27, believes her life has already been lived, she tiptoes into the forbidden territory of unrequited love (Roy, 1997, p. 38). What she has within is an “unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber [which] led her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (Roy, 1997, p. 44). She desires an existence characterized by defiance. For instance, Ammu suddenly hopes that it was Velutha whom Rahel had seen at the Marxist march, her hope stemming from a desire to challenge a world preventing them from fulfilling their love (Roy, 1997, p. 176). In making “the unthinkable

thinkable and the impossible really happen,” Ammu and Velutha are able to create an alternative mode of existence, even if it is an ephemeral one (Roy, 1997, p. 256). This temporality is forbidden from unfolding in “linear time” (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981, p. 15); it is never acknowledged, thus it comes to make up a part of the “loss of identity which is produced by this connection of memories which escape history” (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981, p. 14).

Rahel and Estha’s somewhat unsettling existence tosses them into the margins and brings about solitary experiences. This is illustrated in the nursery rhyme-like language that they use with each other. Estha is described as a “Little Man. He lived in a cara-van. Dum dum” (Roy, 1997, p. 99). They also make a game out of reading backwards: Miss Mitten had seen Satan in their eyes, “nataS in their seye” (Roy, 1997, p. 60). Arguably, this madness began when Estha was sexually abused by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man (Roy, 1997, p. 103). Or perhaps it began with Pappachi’s moth, which “tormented him and his children and his children’s children” (Roy, 1997, p. 49). Rahel finds the moth slowly crawling on to her heart every time her mother tells her she loves her a little less (Roy, 1997, p. 112). Yet, if one were to say that this madness began long before their existence, for “they had known each other before Life began” (Roy, 1997, p. 327), then it becomes a universal condition of humanity, one that finds no place in “linear time” (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981, p. 14). Ironically, temporalities resulting from such madness are doomed the moment they are actualized.

This madness, whenever and wherever it began, whether before or after the days “the Love Laws were made” (Roy, 1997, p. 33), reminds us of what is ‘real.’ It is on the periphery that such realities are unfurled, experienced, and intuited (even if never understood).

Marginal Temporalities in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Peter Walsh emerges as a character that lives on the margins. By challenging the norms of his society, he is condemned to a life of solitude. His detachment from his past society and his perpetual love for Clarissa place him ‘outside’ time. He chooses to live as a “solitary traveler” (Woolf, 2009, p. 49). In the eyes of his companions who have chosen to lead ‘conventional’ lives, Peter’s troubles result from “some flaw in his character” (Woolf, 2009, p. 91). His actions make him an outcast; his identity prevents him from fitting into the social mold of his present world. As he stands in Trafalgar Square, he thinks to himself: “And just because nobody yet knew he was in London, except Clarissa, and the earth, after the voyage, still seemed as island to him, the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown ... overcame him” (Woolf, 2009, p. 44).

Similarly, Septimus’s experiences as a soldier who “went to France to save an England” leave him with burdens based on experiences, which are his alone (Woolf, 2009, p. 73). These solitary experiences allow him to defy his world – perhaps this is most evident in his act of suicide. His death, Clarissa claims, “was an attempt to communicate” (Woolf, 2009, p. 156). Through his suicide, Septimus expresses his fears and his dissatisfaction, his loss and his illusions, and his defiance and abandonment of an entire social system. His prophet-like revelations and insights

about the world foreshadow his 'dignified' suicide. Septimus's death illustrates that, regrettably, there is no place for those who exist on the margins. In his madness, one finds a heightened sensitivity to the natural world. He comes to know the world (and attains the 'absolute') through his intuition (expressed through a 'real' madness) (Bergson, 1946, p. 227). "Men must not cut down trees. There is a God. (He noted such revelations on the backs of envelopes.) No one kills from hatred. Make it known (he wrote down). He waited. He listened" (Woolf, 2009, p. 21).

One can argue that Septimus's madness permits him to perceive (before he conceives) realities. As Bergson claims, "Description, history, and analysis ... leave me in the relative" (1946, p. 189). The doctors, Holmes and Bradshaw, attempt to situate Septimus in the realm of the relative. Through their analysis of Septimus's condition, the doctors only have a relative understanding of him (Bergson, 1946, p. 200). As Bergson states, psychologists isolate and analyze a psychological state (Bergson, 1946, p. 200). How, he asks, can a psychological state be separated when it reflects the whole of an individual (Bergson, 1946, p. 200)? How are they (the doctors) to go back to an intuition they have never had in order to gain a true (absolute) understanding of a 'thing' (Bergson, 1946, p. 201)? Holmes and Bradshaw merely view Septimus as a psychological case and are unable to see the 'whole' of Septimus. Although Clarissa does not know Septimus, she also recognizes this when, at her party, she thinks:

Suppose he [Septimus] had had that passion, and had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor, yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it...Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that (Woolf, 2009, p. 157)?

She identifies nobility in the manner Septimus chooses to 'exit' the world. "Death was defiance," she thinks to herself (Woolf, 2009, p. 156). A military hero who "won promotion" (Woolf, 2009, p. 73-81) during the war, Septimus's suicide is not a result of cowardice, as Dr. Holmes suggests (Woolf, 2009, p. 127), but of defiance. His solitary experiences of madness make him a figure that is marginalized by society where the 'feminine,' the 'mad', and the 'ill' are isolated: "Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (Woolf, 2009, p. 84).

Clarissa, who perhaps has the potential to live in the margins, lacks the 'madness' to defy her world in order to create an alternative present. Through a wisdom she does not know she possesses, she has the capacity to reach an absolute knowledge through her intuition. Clarissa's "only gift was knowing people almost by instinct ... if you put her in a room with someone, up went her back like a cat's; or she purred" (Woolf, 2009, p. 7). Her realization that life cannot be silenced is also indicative of a potential to defy. She claims that "the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps ... can't be dealt with ... by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life" (Woolf, 2009, p. 4). It is precisely this love of life, which cannot be controlled or measured by social and political forces of the world, a love for life that can be

dangerous as it entails a potential to create alternative temporalities. And it cannot be muted. Not even through “man’s subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue or deify” (Roy, 1997, p. 308).

Notions of Gender in Feminine and Marginal Spaces

Challenging preconceived notions of gender entails uncovering what history has missed (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake, 1981, p. 14). It is a return to the past not for the purpose of foretelling the path of the future (as history has a cyclical nature which grows more complex over time) but, rather, for the purpose of creating a future (Grosz, 2004, p. 259). Consequently, gender differences will ultimately increase in unpredictability and difference over time and across space (Grosz, 2004, p. 259). Kristeva et al. pose an important question concerning sexual identity: “What can “identity,” even “sexual identity,” mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged?” (1981, p. 33). Exploring and discovering such experiences of solitude will allow us to understand the experiences of “what must be made rather than known” – for we create these experiences – making such temporalities central to our very existence (Grosz, 2004, p. 259). Grosz writes:

[T]he space between the natural and the cultural, the space in which the biological blurs into and induces the cultural through its own self-variation, in which the biological leads into and is in turn opened up by the transformations the cultural enacts or requires (Grosz, 2004, p. 1).

Estha and Rahel exist as an entity which is simultaneously ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, for even in the “early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us” (Roy, 1997, p. 2). Their switching of ‘expected’ gender roles is representative of a defiance of normative sexual identity. Rahel acts particularly ‘masculine’; as a child, she is punished for decorating cow manure with flowers and is expelled for setting the housemistress’ hair bun on fire (Roy, 1997, pp. 16-17). “It was ... as though she didn’t know how to be a girl” (Roy, 1997, p. 17). Estha, on the other hand, leads a ‘feminine’ existence. Instead of going to college after finishing school, he decides to do the housework (Roy, 1997, p. 11). In his silence, in his rare moments of smiling out loud, Estha “[occupies] very little space in the world” (Roy, 1997, pp. 11-12). While Rahel actively rebels through the choices she makes, Estha is passively “Returned” to his father at the age of seven and “re-Returned” to Ayemenem 23 years later (Roy, 1997, p. 9). Hence, the very nature of Estha and Rahel’s existence is already established as a marginalized state of being – their sexual identities challenge the norm.

The twins also enter the territory of forbidden love. However, unlike Ammu and Velutha who break the laws of the social world, Estha and Rahel break the laws of the natural world, making their act exponentially more painful and tragic than that of Ammu and Velutha. Chacko’s words echo in the readers’ minds when the twins violate the natural laws and commit incest, “Anything is possible in human nature ... Love. Madness. Hope. Infinite joy” (Roy, 1997, p. 118). Their incestuous act, which “was not happiness, but hideous grief” (Roy, 1997, p. 328), is a result of

the natural, social, cultural, and political interplay of the forces within their world which began when the “Love Laws were made” (Roy, 1997, p. 33). Their act exists as part of a system, which forces it to unfurl in an alternative, marginal space resulting from the evolution of the natural and social worlds. It leaves no traces and remains alive only in their memory. Just as the natural world has the ability to influence the social and cultural worlds, so too can the social world affect the natural and biological worlds (Grosz, 2004, p. 1). This is, perhaps, best illustrated on the margins of society where such temporalities are permitted to exist regardless of whether they bring loss, love, joy, or tragedy. There, the edges separating madness and sanity are dispelled. “Prigogine claims that, on the edge of chaos, where such systems undergo unpredictable modifications and developments ... they can be understood as close to life itself, approximating the surprise for the living of the unexpected and the unforeseeable” (Grosz, 2004, p. 248). It is as though there is no way around it, for one is forced to enter repeatedly into the unpredictable.

Happiness is achieved through an ability to forget and surrender to the present, for history haunts spaces and memories (Nietzsche, 1990, p. 89). The space that once held Ammu and Velutha’s memories has been transformed; the memories that once existed only remain alive in Rahel and Estha. Perhaps this is what leads the twins to madness – the persistence and heaviness of history and their drowning in a “well of tears” (Nietzsche, 1990, p. 88). Their once-present is also doomed to a past – a memory in the making. “Ammu worried about madness. Mammachi said it ran in their family” (Roy, 1997, p. 223); a madness that her children discover, perhaps the worst kind.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus’s apparent homosexual desires further place him on the margins; for homosexuality, too, challenges conceptions of identity that are part of a social system – making the “unthinkable thinkable”. Septimus carries with him the loss of his dead comrade, Evans. His relationship with Evans is of a homoerotic nature; it was in Evans that Septimus “had seen beauty” (Woolf, 2009, p. 123). His alternative temporality is expressed through his ‘madness,’ which allows him to bring the past to his present. Through the visions he has, he is able to believe Evans is with him, allowing him to live the past as a virtual present: “A voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking. The dead were with him” (Woolf, 2009, p. 79). Septimus exists in the world of the dead. However, one can also argue that it is the dead that continue to haunt his world, duration, and temporality. Through his marginalization, he lives (and dies) as he pleases. Instead of yielding to the present, he chooses to create one of his own (even if the only way to do so is through death).

In the eyes of his companions, Peter’s troubles result from “some flaw in his character” (Woolf, 2009, p. 91). He is described as being “not altogether manly” (Woolf, 2009, p. 132), further highlighting his existence in a ‘feminine’ time/space. He allows his emotions to guide his actions, falling in love with Daisy, a married woman he meets in India (Woolf, 2009, p. 39).

Peter and Septimus are placed in marginalized, feminine spaces, forcing them to become “solitary travelers” (Woolf, 2009, p. 49). Yet, it is the ‘solitary traveler’ who is able to intuit the absolute by “entering into it” (Bergson, 1946, p. 187). He

understands where the essence lies; it is in the unnoticed things that one finds it. Peter realizes:

Indoors among ordinary things, the cupboard, the table, the window-sill with its geraniums, suddenly the outline of the landlady, bending to remove the cloth, becomes soft with light, an adorable emblem which only the recollection of cold human contacts forbids us to embrace (Woolf, 2009, p. 49-50).

Likewise, Septimus's symptoms of shell shock are temporarily alleviated when he is immersed in a 'feminized' time/space. As he helps his wife sew a hat for the neighbor, he reclaims a missing part of his former self: "It was wonderful. Never had he done anything which made him feel so proud. It was real, it was so substantial, Mrs. Peters' hat" (Woolf, 2009, p. 122).

One is reminded of Bergson who, in redefining metaphysical concepts of 'being,' states that, "to philosophize means to reverse the normal direction of the workings of thought" (1946, p. 224). By proposing a mode of (re)living that is based on reaching the absolute through intuition, Bergson challenges typical modes of thinking which rely on analysis and yield only a relative understanding (1946, p. 224). There, one finds a desire to embrace the ordinary, the forgotten, and the 'real.' It is within the 'feminine' spaces that one learns of the unnoticed yet crucial events which escape linear time; they are vital for the mere fact that they are 'real.' Only the 'solitary traveler' stands at a vantage point to uncover the absolute. But "to whom does the solitary traveler make reply?" (Woolf, 2009, p. 50).

Furthermore, marginal temporalities often find the space to unfold in the unnoticed and raw world of nature, which is a 'feminine' and marginal time/space. It was in the countryside of Bourton that Clarissa "was most reckless; did the most idiotic thing out of bravado; bicycled round the parapet on the terrace: smoked cigars" (Woolf, 2009, p. 29). Clarissa was able to genuinely 'be'; sadly, she is unable "to get an echo of her old emotion" in her present (Woolf, 2009, p. 29). Bourton is only ever destined to be a memory and never a possibility. After Sally's kiss, "[Clarissa] felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it" (Woolf, 2009, p. 30). Can one not say that Sally's kiss had also given her a once-present moment, an alternative temporality? So detached from the person she was, her existence is defined in her being Mrs. Richard Dalloway (Woolf, 2009, p. 9). The space of the 'what once was' comes to take precedence over the space of the 'what is.' Clarissa's memories of Bourton appear more emotionally charged than her present-day walk in London.

Similarly, Ammu and Velutha's hub becomes the unnoticed and miniscule world of nature. In the History House across the river, they are allowed to exist in an alternative temporality. Nestled there, they "laughed at ant-bites on each other's bottoms. At clumsy caterpillars sliding off the ends of leaves, at overturned beetles that couldn't right themselves. At the pair of small fish that always sought Velutha out in the river and bit him" (Roy, 1997, p. 338). As a result, they can only conceive of tomorrow and not beyond. In their temporality, history is "sloughed off like old snakeskin" (Roy, 1997, p. 176). This madness permits them to exist outside the conventional social order in a 'feminine' and marginal temporality. They live only in their present, for

“instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things” (Roy, 1997, p. 338). Velutha tries to be rational, telling himself he can lose everything (Roy, 1997, p. 334), yet he knows they are both condemned by the social forces of their world; this, as they learn, is the “cost of living” (Roy, 1997, p. 336). It is the price they pay for trying to place their love within linear time. “It was human history, masquerading as God’s Purpose...” (Roy, 1997, p. 309) – a history that will not be recognized. And their alternative present comes to be a “history lesson for future offenders” that dare defy the world through their existence (Roy, 1997, p. 336). Only within this feminine space is their love given an opportunity to temporalize as it silently beats to the overlooked rhythms of nature.

The History House later comes to represent a false (relative) history that no longer has any connection with its true (absolute) history. In this new History House, Kathakali stories are condensed so as not to bore tourists, and what remains of the past is a mere reed umbrella, a wicker couch, and a wooden dowry box to showcase to tourists (Roy, 1997, p. 126). ‘Heritage’ it was now called, masking the word ‘history’; while heritage has a futural connotation, for it is preserved and given over to the coming generations, history is often forgotten and left behind in spaces and people who are long gone.

Ammu and Velutha’s present time/space appears more vivid than any other temporality in the novel. For example, while Baby Kochamma lives in the shadows of her unfulfilled love for Father Mulligan, Ammu and Velutha choose a short-lived alternative present temporality over one that is imposed on them by their social world (Roy, 1997, p. 22). This alternative present is allowed to unfold in the space of the History House across the river. The possibility of living in the present becomes imperative to their existence.

An Afterthought

On the periphery, the characters are forced to create an alternative time/space – one that is condemned the moment it is actualized. They live the future as a memory; memories become the only time that truly matters. In such circumstances, one realizes that there are only two options: to yield to the present or to create one. Those on the margins often choose the latter making their memories significantly more ‘real’ than the present itself.

Just as Ammu and Velutha have created an alternative present, a time/space with no future, Estha and Rahel also create their own alternative time. Their tragic incestuous act is condemned to a past which escapes history. Estha and Rahel’s memories become drastically more painful than those of Velutha and Ammu. Their madness stems from defiance, and perhaps, like Septimus’s act of suicide, it, too, is an attempt to communicate – but who is there to listen?

When alternative presents are created and actualized in space, what happens to the memories after this space disappears? They are forgotten as a means of self-protection; however, they can also linger and return in unexpected ways. Such is the state of history. As Nietzsche asserts, “there is a degree of insomnia, of rumination, of historical awareness, which injures and finally destroys a living thing, whether a man, a people,

or a culture” (1990, p. 90). And such is the price to pay for choosing to ‘be.’ The “cost of living” (Roy, 1997, p. 336) illustrates the consequences of being in the margins, of existing (or not being allowed to exist) as one pleases, of loving (or not being allowed to love) whom one chooses, and of expressing this in a temporality of a sort. In the spaces of aloneness one creates, a doomed present slowly seeps into the past.

Just as the Kathakali stories are able to survive across generations in spite of (rather than because of) their predictability, we, too, are propelled to live our lives as though they will never end in spite of the throbbing certainty that they will; this is an astounding trait of human beings. Ammu’s final encounter with Velutha ends with the word ‘tomorrow’ (Roy, 1997, p. 340), illustrating that they are aware of their dreadful fate. What makes them all the more human is that they cross the boundaries despite this knowledge. “If it were now to die, ’twere now to be most happy,” Clarissa had thought to herself as she hurried down to meet Sally Seton for dinner (Woolf, 2009, p. 156). Ammu and Velutha, too, would have died most happily in their present.

Woolf and Roy appear to suggest that certain degrees of madness are necessary in order to create temporalities which are often central to our very existence. When such experiences are repressed, when they invisibly come to make up a part of our identity through their insistence to remain long after the spaces that once held them have disappeared, the human condition becomes ‘ill.’ Madness yields madness. Oftentimes, these temporalities are able to unfurl in a raw time/space, which is ‘feminine’ by default. As a result, they are left out of history for they have no future in linear time – their existence is characterized by ‘being’ rather than by ‘becoming.’ To speak of a god of small things implies that somewhere prowls another god, a god of larger, yet less significant things. Perhaps it is in history that one finds the god of larger things, and in what escapes it, one discovers the god of small things. All that is left of the ‘true’ History House is Rahel’s wristwatch, which is eternally frozen at ten to two (Roy, 1997, p. 312). And all that remains of Bourton is the fading recollection of Sally Seton’s kiss (Woolf, 2009, p. 30). What lingers is a universal “well of tears” (Woolf, 2009, p. 8). But sadly, as memories are abandoned, we forget why we cry.

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