The Ethical Subject of The God of Small Things

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Lacan’s well-known aphoristic formulations that “desire is the desire of the Other” and “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” necessarily entail that the human subject is a social subject. Coming to life inevitably among language users, the subject is constructed in an identification with the signifiers of language—with letters, sounds, detached words and phrases—which become the elements of the unconscious, organized in a syntax of metaphor and metonymy. The child addresses demands to the mother or caretaker in signifiers and is addressed through signifiers which henceforth mark and determine desire. Entering into social exchange through language, desire pursues an object beyond whatever would fulfill the subject’s immediate needs, its satisfaction never adequate to the love it wants. The unconscious is the discourse of the Other, because signifiers motivate and carry the subject’s desire, forming associative networks and chains that remain the material of an unknown, that is, repressed, memory.

Language takes form by excluding the Thing, the lacking substance of complete enjoyment, or jouissance, whose absence is occupied by the mother as Other and covered over by the object of drive, the objet a, that is detached from the body. The subject identifies with the lacking object and thereby tries to attain an impossible jouissance. Desire is the desire of the Other, because the subject wants to be what the lacking Other desires; its desire is an answer to the question of the Other’s desire. It is as a prohibition of that Other, the mother whose desire the subject questions and wants to answer to, that the Name of the Father is introduced, propelling the subject into language by forbidding the ultimate jouissance of incest. In the process of castration, the subject gives up the project of filling the Other’s lack and takes on a sexual position as masculine or feminine, its jouissance reduced to limited pleasures. In the nuclear family of modern, Western cultures, castration operates through the Oedipus complex, and it will take different forms in different kinship systems, but castration or the incest prohibition must function in subject formation as the Law that is the prerequisite for any social being ruled by particular social laws.

The Freudian myth of the primal father makes legible the necessity of the incest prohibition at the origin of social organization, as does Lacan’s assertion that the ten commandments derive from the incest prohibition and that the moral law is the law of language. Moustapha Saouan likewise argues that the law of language—in other words, the incest prohibition—is the basis for social relation. The regulation of reciprocity in marriage, made possible by the incest prohibition, is the law of exchange that governs speech. But the law that allows for social being cannot in itself determine what would be a more or less just society, nor can it predict what specific forms reciprocity will take in any given society, just that there be reciprocal exchange. So the language of any given culture, even while it derives from the universal prohibition, will carry the weight of its accumulated experience, customs, and forms of domination, marking its specificity in master signifiers that will consequently mark the desire and hence the unconscious material of the culture’s subjects.

In an increasingly global economy, the master signifiers of the dominating international regime increasingly infiltrate local cultures and economies, introducing new ideals for identification and new forms of coercion and reinforcing established forms of injustice. The global master discourse, because it has the power to determine forms of social exchange universally, enters into unconscious processes of subjects everywhere to construct desire. It is the radical project of The God of Small Things, the 1997 novel of Arundhati Roy, to
undermine the laws of social exchange, what the narrator in a repeated refrain calls "the Love Laws... That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (311). Specifically, the novel resists the laws of exchange determining social arrangements within the local context of Kerala, the southwestern province of a modern India integrated into the global economy. The novel develops Arjun Appadurai's understanding of the global economy's infiltration of local economies of desire, consumption, and political power, as it shows "the ways in which local historical trajectories flow into complicated transnational structures" (Appadurai 65) and represents "the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world" (Appadurai 52). The novel's "Love Laws" are the grammar structuring the interpenetration of global and local power, the regulations governing capitalist distribution, caste, and women.¹

The Love Laws operate to shape the signifiers of the discourse of the Other and thereby give the conditions for subject formation in the novel, but at the same time, because they are inseparable from power relations, the laws that form and structure desire privilege particular identities and desires while excluding or disenfranchising other possibilities. Specifically, the novel dramatizes the unequal effects of the laws of international culture, imposed in a master discourse entering the local environment through the entertainment industry, consumerism, and international migration and travel; the laws of caste that traditionally govern social relations in India in complicity with class inequality in the global economy; and the regulation of women that founds patriarchal power. But since the Love Law at the origin of any law at all is the incest prohibition, the violation of the incest prohibition in the narrative stands as a measure of the novel's radical interrogation of the foundations of social exchange.²

¹The God of Small Things is structured in alternating chapters that cover two narratives. The first reconstructs two traumatic weeks in 1969 in the childhood of the twins, Rahel and Estha, beginning when the extended family—the twins, their mother, Ammu, Ammu's brother, Chacko, and their great aunt, Baby Kochamma—drive to Cochin to greet Chacko's English ex-wife Margaret and his daughter, Sophie Mol, at the airport. Their car is stopped on the road by Communist demonstrators, among whom the family recognizes Velutha, the low-caste, untouchable worker who has befriended the twins, and some men in the crowd humiliate Baby Kochamma. When later in the day they attend a showing of The Sound of Music, their treat before going to the airport, Estha is molested at the refreshment stand. During the following two weeks, Ammu has an affair with Velutha; the twins, feeling afraid and unwanted, prepare a hideout in an old house on the nearby river, and when they run away with Sophie Mol, she drowns; the local police, aided by Baby Kochamma's desire for revenge, savagely beat Velutha as the twins watch from their hiding place. Velutha dies from his beating, and the family is broken up: Ammu sent away and Estha sent to his father. The second narrative takes place twenty-three years later, when Rahel comes back home after Ammu has died in poverty, Chacko has emigrated, and Estha has been returned by his father to Baby Kochamma, who lives alone with her television and servant. An omniscient narrator violates the order of chronology by breaking narrative sequence to move forward and backward in time, as if the narrative continuity of the novel is itself unsettled by the violence of the action. As well, the writing transgresses the laws of English, both in the style of the narration and in the twins' uncanny ability to communicate with each other by talking backwards. Since the laws of language are the laws of social exchange, the sensuous, vital, fresh writing itself takes on an ethical status as a reality capable of sustaining love of the other and of the self in a commitment to desire opposed to the power of global capitalism to regulate caste, children, and women.

²Before the subject is fully submitted to the laws of language governing phonemes, morphemes, and syntax, what Lacan calls "lalangue" materializes desire in letters, in materialized sounds, sensuous images, and the representations of things. Unconscious jouissance infuses the detached signifiers of lalangue, the isolated units of sound that are apparently meaningless conglomerations of syllables. The narrator of The God of Small Things violates the laws of standard English usage and pronunciation to recreate the way that Rahel and Estha as children repeatedly play with the elements of words and phrasing that mark their formation as subjects in childhood to give "the bleached
bones” (32) of a story, as if the elemental units of lalangue are the material of desire whose repetition constructs personal history. The writing breaks words into syllables, as in “a Nowl” or “Bar Nowl,” or weights them with emotion: “Later became a menacing, goosebumpy word. Lay. Ter. Like a deep-sounding bell in a mossy well. Shivery, and furred. Like a moth’s feet” (139). Phrases reduce to nonsense, and neologisms, form, as in “Thimble-drinker. Coffin-cartwheeler” (134). Words combine in rhymes, to create unanticipated meanings, like “a viable die-able age” (310). Meaning decomposes into pure phonemes, like “Per NUN sea ayushun” (147). Capitalization enforces necessity and emphasis, as in “It's Best to be Prepared” (253). All of these elements of lalangue reappear to take on a life of their own in the writing, especially the mother’s disciplinary injunction, “stop it,” transformed to “stoppit,” “STOP IT!,” and “so they stoppited.” As these phonemes and phrases are repeated, they stand out as signifiers marking subjectification. As well, these signifiers transmit family history and thereby mark the children with a fatality, transmitted like an inheritance. The image of the moth, for example, is metonymic of the obsessive collecting of the children’s grandfather and conveys the fear of his violence that haunts the family. Language for the children is literal and oral; what they read is transformed into sounds, and what they hear has the material substance of letters. Their world is an idiosyncratic, shared speech, and they protect their world and escape adult surveillance with an uncanny facility of talking backwards, or they bypass language altogether, communicating intuitively in a kind of unspoken nondifferentiation.

Lalangue gives the elements of the Other, laying out the sequences and networks of metonymy that determine the unconscious desire of the subject not yet submitted to the laws of language in master signifiers of jouissance. Desire and subjectification thereby take form in the Other. The language of the novel’s omniscient narrator, like the children’s, reinvents ordinary language, infusing it with jouissance. It is a writing, like much women’s writing, heavy with melodrama. Anticipation of the future is often portentous, evoking an undefined doom:

While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws. They heard its sickening thud. They smelled its smell and never forgot it. History’s smell.

Like old roses on a breeze. (53–4)

Incomplete sentences, separated in the printed layout as separate paragraphs, exaggerate emotion, while sensuous images and metaphors strain against the limits of conventional prose by insisting on the body. The exaggerations, stark emotionality, and threat of violence pervade even description of setting in a kind of pathetic fallacy that links nature to subjectivity:

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dust-green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, faintly baffled in the sun. (3)

Words combine in single, sensuous impressions, like “dust-green,” and incomplete phrases and irregular paragraphing compose rhythms that convey tone and judgment:

Enough?

Enough.

They stepped away from him. Craftsmen assessing their work. Seeking aesthetic distance. (294)

The descriptions of characters convey judgments through sensuous associations; for example, the grandfather’s casual cruelty inhabits the effect of his photograph—“There was a watchful stillness to the photograph that lent an underlying chill to the warm room in which it hung” (50)—and perversion oozes from the sickly detail describing Estha’s molester—“the Orangedrink Lemondrink man was eating a sweet. His cheek was bulging with a moving sweet. He made soft, sucking sounds like water draining from a basin” (102). Even seemingly inconsequential, useless objects evoke the pathos of nostalgia when they appear listed in incomplete sentences set in separate paragraphs:

Then the policemen looked around and saw the grass mat.
The pots and pans.
The inflatable goose.
The Quantas koala with loosened button eyes.
The ballpoint pens with London's streets in them.
Socks with separate colored toes.
Yellow-rimmed red plastic sunglasses.
A watch with the time painted on it. (295)

The commodities of the global economy become signifiers of the children’s desire, small things reappearing in the narrative as metonyms of their history: “the ballpoint pens with London streets on them” embodying a foreign world of privilege; a “Quantas koala” representing foreign travel; the watch stuck at a painted two-fifteen a metaphor of the trauma that invades the children’s lives to stop time. But the presence of the global economy in subject formation is most evident in the infiltration of the international entertainment industry into fantasies that construct identity. Estha arranges his hair in an Elvis Presley puff; the twins sing of “Popeye the sailor man.” Baby Kochamma, the children’s great aunt, fills her days with television programs. Television programming in India is an important medium for the implementation of class membership, as it serves an “impertive of an expanding consumer goods market to reach out to and embrace the burgeoning middle classes” (Chakravarty and Gooptu 104) and defines norms of global citizenship. Programming like The Best of Donahue, for example, provides a link to American fantasies of life-style and to ambitions reaffirmed by the staged politics of a television violence that threatens bourgeois comfort:

She was frightened by the BBC famines and television wars that she encountered while she channel surfed. Her old fears of the Revolution and the Marxist-Leninist menace had been rekindled by new television worries about the growing numbers of desperate and dispossessed people. She viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture. (28)

The entertainment industry motivates and furthers the materialism and self-righteous status of the middle class citizen.

According to Lacan, the ego is constructed both in a mirroring identification with an ideal ego, which the subject takes to be the self, and from the perspective of an ego-ideal, the position from which the ego sees itself as lovable. The ego-ideal is based on traits given by the Other. When race or gender or class privilege marks the master signifiers of the Other, the subject who is discordant with those signifiers will see itself as inferior, unworthy, and unlovable; the ego-ideal will take form as lacking the desirable traits. In the contemporary international economy, the power of the entertainment industry throughout the world to lay down and enforce traits of identification based on western, white ideals abjects those subjects whose bodies necessarily do not conform to those traits or who lack the means to buy into the ideal life-style.

The distorting effects of the ego-ideal of the racialized Other dominating the production of global fantasy are imposed on the twin children, Rahel and Estha, attending the “World Hit,” The Sound of Music, just when their uncle Chacko’s half-white, English daughter is about to enter their immediate world, bringing with her a foreign measure of subjective value. The children’s delight in the movie is a symptom of the power of Hollywood to further cultural dislocation: even while India is home to an advanced cinema industry in Bombay, which Roy herself has worked in, it is the authority of western fantasy that draws the children. Watching the foreign movie, they are struck by their racial difference from the ideal the movie naturalizes and by their lack of the paternal signifier that governs the western, nuclear family:

[Christopher Plummer] loved them. He loved her (Julie Andrews), she loved him, they loved the children, the children loved them. They all loved each other. They were clean, white children, and their beds were soft with Ei. Der. Downs. (100)

The mechanical description of the movie’s idealized relations underlines simultaneously the ideal’s falsity as well as the Indian children’s fragile security, the precariousness of the love they receive from their single mother and her extended family. Julie Andrews’s “a clean song about a few of her favorite things” can bear no relation to the children’s provincial realities, so that “(1) Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes... (3) Bright copper kettles. (4) Doorbells and sleighbells and schnitzel with noodles” (101) remind them only of what
they are not and do not possess. The bodies they know and love do not have "No hair on their knees. No melons in their blouses" (95). Consequently, as they encounter the alien ego-ideal, they are split between their image of themselves and the traits that pose them as inadequate. Interrogating themselves with the accusatory voice of the Other, they see themselves as failing the ideal, since the demands of the western ego-ideal measure the children as unlovable, lacking normative features:

(a) Are they clean white children?
No. (But Sophie Mol is).
(b) Do they blow spit bubbles?
Yes. (But Sophie Mol doesn't).
(c) Do they shiver their legs? Like clerks?
Yes. (But Sophie Mol doesn't).
(d) Have they, either or both, ever held strangers' soos-soos?
N... Nyes. (But Sophie Mol hasn't). (101)

The ideal their western cousin, Sophie Mol, represents cannot apply to them, and the movie seduces the children into a fantasy that motivates self-hatred.

Sexual seduction repeats and reinforces the seduction of cinematic fantasy, to close off the possibility of desire for Estha. Coerced into masturbating the Orangedrink Lemondrink vendor behind the refreshment stand in the lobby of the cinema, Estha is put in the perverse position of acting as the object of the jouissance of the Other. He is overcome with guilt and fear for what he takes as his responsibility for a wrong he knows he's committed but doesn't comprehend. His desire becomes immersed in an overwhelming, persecutory jouissance, marked by a "sticky-sweet, vomitory" sensation, the signifier of his seducer's obscene enjoyment. That signifier links up with the signifier of home, the sticky atmosphere of the "Paradise Pickles" factory Chako runs on the family property. The condensation of the signifiers of domesticity and seduction joins desire to an excessive jouissance.

The ultimate obstacle to Estha's formation as subject of desire is the forced choice that identifies him as object of the Other's demand. After Sophie Mol's drowning and the discovery of Ammu's love affair with Velutha, the untouchable man the children adore, the children watch the police brutally beat Velutha, and Estha is coerced by Baby Kochamma into identifying Velutha as their abductor in order, he is told, to save his mother from the police: "If you want to save her, all you have to do is to go with the Uncle... He'll ask you a question. One question. All you have to do is to say "Yes." Then we can all go home. It's so easy. It's a small price to pay" (302). The structure of desire is laid down in the subject as his answer to the question of what he thinks the Other wants of him; desire then responds to and protects from the desire of the Other. But in this case, the Other's demand determines the answer of the subject and thereby deprives him of response and protection: "The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt" (302). The manipulation throws the child outside any Oedipal resolution; he is thrust into Hamlet's dilemma, enjoined to authorize the murder of his mother's lover, the one taking the place of the father. Lacking a basis for the paternal signifier, he is especially vulnerable to the ravages of the maternal-superego. Estha's complicity with the Other as a child causes his rejection of speech as an adult, leaving him in an impossible conflict between mute guilt and rebellion against the law. Estha's forced choice of a choice the Other has already made for him deprives him of choice, of freedom, and makes him an unwilling active participant in the injustice that the novel's narrator calls History.

The history of any person takes shape as the structures determining subjective formation work out in the contingent circumstances of a life; indeed, the subject is the effect of just that particular, contingent history preserved in signifiers, the discourse of the unconscious. At the level of social exchange, the incest prohibition that allows for reciprocity as a general rule works out within the specific structures of particular culture; the general, universal rule of social exchange can only operate in particular contingencies and circumstances. In *The God of Small Things* history is the mechanical reproduction of rules of exchange perpetuating power in everyday life, and the narrative is just the enactment of the operations of history in and through individual histories, as personal strategies, motives, and needs are caught up in social law and thereby to enact it: "human nature's pursuit of ascendency. Structure, Order. Complete monopoly. It was human history,
masquerading as God’s Purpose. . . . This was an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it. History in live performance” (292–3). Global inequality is aligned with the local inequalities that determine and limit the possibilities and choices of the characters, so that, as the law plays out in their narrative, they are inevitably subjects of brute force and excessive enjoyment of power, the underside of law. Baby Kochamma’s demand for respectability and comfort aligns with police corruption to entrap the children; humiliated by Marxist demonstrators, among whom Velutha, she is determined on revenge. Velutha’s father, frightened by the violation of caste boundaries, reports his son’s transgression. The local Marxist labor leader, Comrade Pillai, uses Chacko’s personal disarray to incite a mob to burn down the pickle factory, and he is enabled to advance his political ambitions. Acting within their circumstances, using those circumstances to further personal strategies and goals, the characters perform a history that consistently enforces power and privilege, carrying out “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” (292). Man here is the gendered noun, not a neutral “Mankind,” since the narrator is specifically identifying a patriarchal regime whose power is based on fear. The narrator’s tone of bitter irony shows ideology to be a rationalization of the suffering of the powerless, of children, women, and lower castes; because ideology characteristically explains suffering as the consequence of the necessary functioning of law, it is condemned as the “old omelette-and-eggs thing” (159) that justifies unequal power.

As social subjects, we are more or less conscious of the desires inhabiting our unconscious processes and more or less conscious of the discourses and political relations that interpolate our desire into the discourses and power relations ruling us. Psychoanalysis may give the individual access to the truth of desire, but because it itself participates and is determined in history as a social practice, it cannot be exempt from history. In a world system ruled by unequal distribution and unequal power relations, psychoanalysis becomes one of the goods distributed unequally in the global economy. Rahel and Estha as children have minimal awareness of and control over the rules of their culture and are without the resources of psychoanalytic therapies that would give them access to desire. They are betrayed by power, by the caste system that allows Velutha’s life to be expendable, by the police affirming order and carrying out duty, by the strategies of political faction—in sum, by the big things that are politics and history in which they unknowingly participate:

A pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. . . . Unable, somehow, to change plays. Or purchase, for a fee, some cheap brand of exorcism from a counselor with a fancy degree, who would sit them down and say, in one of many ways: “You’re not the Sinners. You’re the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the victims, not the perpetrators.” (182)

The blind functioning of social arrangements and the self-serving manipulation of those arrangements enlist the children without their knowledge. Twenty-three years after the two weeks whose events compose the main narrative, when Rahel returns to find Estha again living in the family home, incest is the only opening for their desire, a radical refusal of difference and time and a nostalgic return to their connection to love, childhood, and the mother before the devastating effects of perverse law. Incest is the violation of the basis of social exchange, of generational succession in time, and hence of history, but here it is represented to be fidelity to a betrayed desire. The incest of the novel is then a radical challenge to Law, because it challenges the very possibility of social being.

The incest is the final event in the narrative chronology, but the novel ends with a moving, sensual narration of Ammu’s and Velutha’s love, as if it has worked to free feminine jouissance from the constraining restrictions of corrupt law by disengaging the woman from the mother, the woman whose very name, “Ammu,” defines her exclusively as mother. Psychoanalysis sometimes encourages the reduction of woman to the role of mother and, under the guise of a theory of castration that posits woman as the embodiment of lack, endorses phallic privilege, and conservative ideolo-
gies frequently enlist psychoanalysis to confine women to their reproductive functions. Sexual difference in Lacanian theory, however, defines all human subjects as castrated, barred from the jouissance of the Other under the law of language, and it posits a feminine, Other jouissance as the surplus of the speaking subject who is not all in language; woman is a subject of the Other, but not all of her is submitted to castration.

Ammu’s refusal of the laws of caste and the restrictions on women is an ethical act that refuses to betray desire. As a woman in Kerala, Ammu was allowed a limited education, while her brother attended Cambridge; divorced from an alcoholic, abusive husband, she has little hope of remarrying; she has no rights to inheritance, and living with her natal family, she and her children are treated as burdens, particularly by Baby Kochamma, who has given up on desire: “Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman” (44–5). Yet Ammu is not all resigned to the limits of the law; she has an “Unsafe Edge,” an “air of unpredictability” that emerges when she smokes, listens to songs on her transistor radio, when even “her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk” (43). Feminine jouissance pulsing through Ammu threatens to explode the love laws governing woman’s desire.

What plays out in Ammu is the conflict between woman as mother, regulated by social law, and woman as subject of desire following her own jouissance: “It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (44). The intolerable split between mother and desiring, sexual subject is the effect of patriarchal power imposing a forced choice on woman: If Ammu chooses to be only a mother, she faces an empty future of abject stagnation, eaten away in “the vapid, vinegary fumes that rose from the cement vats of Paradise Pickles. Fumes that wrinkled youth and pickled future” (214); if she chooses desire, the children become “the millstones” (240) strangling her. The Love Laws make the reconciliation of mother with desiring woman an impossibility.

Ammu’s radical refusal to give up on desire stands as the novel’s commitment to the good of the subject. As she chooses to love Velutha, she rejects the paternal law governing the regulation of women and at the same time breaks the rigidity of caste stratification, like Lacan’s Antigone following a commitment to her desire in conflict with state power. The God of Small Things ends with the single paragraph, “Tomorrow,” the woman’s promise to meet her lover again, as if the novel too held out the promise of a future under law that would allow desire for all human beings.

The contemporary global economy, studied under the name of postcolonialism, appears to be a neocolonialism in the guise of a universalism that parodies progressive ideals in order to justify its operations. Arjun Appadurai explains that the “globalization of culture is not the same as its homogenization, but globalization involves the use of a variety of instruments of homogenization . . . that are absorbed into local political and cultural economies” so that “the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thereby proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular” (42, 43). Contemporary postmodernist critiques of social formations and cultures undermine the pretensions of the universal subject of the Enlightenment while ignoring the actually existing universal subject constructed by global neocolonialism; such critiques acquiesce in a deceptive, restricted universality, a western, middle-class ideal based on the autonomous, self-determining individual of capitalist consumption. The Egyptian writer and activist Sherif Hetata speaks for much of the world’s population when he points out, “For the first time in the history of countries like ours we are watching the homogenization of Western or Northern culture into a consolidated, alluring image of the other, of a liberal, capitalist, materially and sexually enticing market, of a world where comparison with our life can only force us to look up to it in reverence” (285). The result is a destruction of local culture or an elevation of the local in new forms of absolutism and privilege. In effect, the postmodernist critique of the universal subject operates practically to deny equal rights to exploited subjects by denying in theory the possibility of a global subject of rights.
Psychoanalysis offers a different definition of the subject as a subject of desire submitted to law, one founded on the reality that the speaker of language—Lacan’s parleure—is formed in social exchange and relation. In the contemporary global economy, the discourse of capitalism marks subjects everywhere, producing signifiers of unconscious desire and effects of jouissance. As both a practice and a body of theory, psychoanalysis cannot ignore the perversion of law that dominates the global economy, not only because that economy enters into the discourse of the Other and thereby into subjectivization but because this is the historical context psychoanalysis operates in and because psychoanalysis participates in and contributes to it. Individual psychoanalysts have only begun to take account of the effects of the global economy on their practice.3

Human rights are dismissed in postmodernist critique as another corrupted Enlightenment ideal. But international law based on human rights is a powerful instrument for advancing the rights of subjects globally. Activists and feminists in crosscultural association—working in United Nations’ commissions, NGOs, labor movements, refugee organizations, educational institutions, physicians’ organizations, for example—protect the powerless from false universalism. Political theorists are beginning to define a basis for a legal universalism; aware of the temptations of cultural imperialism, Michael Ignatieff, for example, bases a minimal notion of universal rights on the value of the human dignity of the subject, adopting categories of Enlightenment thought to contemporary conditions. Advocates for women’s rights, for children, and for exploited classes and castes base struggles in local environments on the discourse of universal human rights. Knowing something about desire and law, psychoanalysis knows something about the possibilities of the (dignity of the) subject and so has much to contribute to the legal universalism proponents of human rights such as Ignatieff sponsor.

The celebration of the Real in much current psychoanalytic theory finds trauma, jouissance, the phallus everywhere, often without analyzing the specific historical or political contexts in which the Real appears or its particular ideological uses. Such theoretical ahistoricism is ultimately complicit with the false universalism of the global economy: what neocolonialism banks on, after all, is jouissance outside the law—the jouissance of entertainment, consumption, individual privilege, brute power. Lacanian theorists have begun to sketch out a psychoanalytic support for political equality; Joan Copjec, in a notable and neglected example, founds rights on the irreducible claim of the object a as cause of the subject of democracy. An ethical psychoanalysis, engaged with human rights supported by analysis of the subject of desire, awaits elaboration.4

NOTES

1Frederic Jameson’s influential claim that post-colonial literature always allegorizes the nation needs to be reconsidered in the light of The God of Small Things, where the nation is something like an absent mediator between the local and the global, figured only through rules governing property, the caste system and the regulation of women, and the regional operations of the Communist party and the police. In the international global system, the nation increasingly is an agent of the transnational economy: as Leslie Sklair points out, the “central feature of the idea of globalization is that many contemporary problems cannot be adequately studied at the level of nation-states, that is, in terms of international relations, but need to be theorized in terms of global (transnational) processes, below the level of the nation-state” (296). The whole question of the character and function of national states in the global economy is of course an important focus of post-colonial studies.

2Incest in other contemporary Indian novels is generally suffered as coercion; see especially Akhil Sharma, The Obedient Father, where father/daughter incest is the cause of prolonged jouissance, outrage, and guilt. The God of Small Things is atypical in sympathetically dramatizing incest as a possibility for desire.

3Gérard Pommier provides an exemplary analysis of the pressures on psychoanalysis in a global culture.

4Inderpal Grewal gives a wide-ranging discussion of the difficulties of respecting cultural differences in local work negotiating with the effects of global power.

WORKS CITED


