

**Transgression, Desire, and Death in Mai Al-Nakib’s “Echo Twins”  
and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things***

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**Abstract**

This paper addresses the theme of transgression in two texts: “Echo Twins” by Kuwaiti author Mai Al-Nakib and *The God of Small Things* by Indian author Arundhati Roy. Both writers exploit the theme of transgression by employing transgressive female protagonists. These protagonists persistently call attention to the subtle nuances of love and desire and, by doing so, are able to expunge commonplace borders that separate male/female, self/other and colonizer/colonized. Persuasive and compelling, these characters are able to assert their own voice and as a result place themselves in an evident position of agency. However comprehensively the subject of love and desire may be generally understood, for the authors of both of these texts desire is conceived purposefully as a site for the subversion of power hierarchies. Herein, by placing the Kuwaiti text alongside the Indian text, it is anticipated that relevant similarities between the female transgressive characters will lead the reader to such a conclusion. Both writers, furthermore, create a critical space of analysis and locate it beyond the merely symbolic in order to furnish an innovative interpretation to the power of the “maternal”.

**Keywords:** transgression, desire, female protagonists, Kuwaiti, postcolonial, semiosis

## Transgression

Transgressive female characters in fiction tend to cause a disruption in conventional frames of reference and in the contextual schema by which truth is imagined in the public sphere. Transgression in itself is an act worth pausing at and evaluating in order to assess its impact both on the protagonist and on her surroundings: the family, the environment and the wider community. Mai Al-Nakib's collection of short stories *The Hidden Light of Objects*, set in Kuwait, has one story that contains such a character. The collection has been recognized for its innovative character: it won the Edinburgh International First Book Award in 2014. Al-Nakib writes boldly and thoughtfully about personal histories in Kuwait, narratives set against the backdrop of the broader history of that small country. These stories share a common melancholic tone, a mourning for lost people, objects, memories, and a desire to reclaim that which has been changed or lost throughout time. One of the stories, "Echo Twins", stands out in its treatment of desire, transgression, and death. The female protagonist, Mama Hayat, dares to enter into transgressive space when in 1937 she falls in love with a foreigner, a white man, at a time when "Kuwait was overrun with oil diggers, many of them blond and British" (p. 39). The portrayal of her transgression is very similar to Arundhati Roy's rendering of the love affair between Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*, a work that won the Booker Prize in London in 1997.

I submit that these two representations of desire and death are inherently similar in many ways. Al-Nakib writes about the private domain in a Kuwaiti setting while Roy tackles the caste system both in the private and the public sphere. While there are certainly subtle differences, the overarching similarity that may commonly be observed in transgressive female protagonists is apparent in these two narratives. The gynocritical approach used here aims to argue for the recognition of a strictly female literary tradition by exploring the intertextual relations between women's narratives and their treatment of specific themes. As such, the treatment of love in "Echo Twins" and *The God of Small Things* is similar in that it grants women agency through transgressive love.

Societal pushback to these women's actions becomes evident as the plots unfold. For one, as we read we gradually come to the daunting realization that desire, transgression, and death are interconnected and complementary in both of these texts. This means that the cost of transgressive acts of love, acts viewed as revolutionary, is usually the death of the male counterpart: both Velutha (the Untouchable) and Alexander disappear from the narratives, thus reasserting the social order.

Chris Jenks's *Transgression* provides a solid foundation for understanding the overall subject of transgression, giving a critical overview of the term and its multiple definitions and interpretations. He proposes a straightforward definition of the term: "Transgression is that which exceeds boundaries or exceeds limits" (p. 7). Jenks's definition makes clear that transgressive behavior is essential in the preservation of social order, as it reaffirms its importance:

Transgressive behavior therefore does not deny limits of boundaries, rather it exceeds them and completes them . . . The transgression is a component of the rule . . . it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule. Transgression is not the same as disorder; it opens up chaos and reminds us of the necessity of order. (p. 7)

And yet, because of the way female protagonists threaten the male “order” of social norms, constructions, customs, traditions, and the law, they are successful in creating a subversive female space, a space that may be found in art, poetry, literature, and in the erotics of the body. Female desire becomes a form of expression, a detected voice and a source of agency, even if order is re-affirmed in the end, as Jenks emphasizes. Narratives of desire and agency, such as these two, are poignant in their creation of subversive space for transgressive female characters.

### **Intertextuality**

Kuwaiti literature is mainly written in Arabic, and very few works are translated into English. Al-Nakib’s work is atypical because it is written in English; it explores the multiple cognitive and emotional dimensions of being trapped between a vanished past and the present moment. Kuwait, a relatively small country in the Gulf region, has undergone vast changes over the past fifty years. In the nation’s literature it is uncommon to find a collection of short stories dealing with one overarching theme as happens in Al-Nakib’s stories: therein, Kuwait is suspended between past and present, and the characters are unable to find a space that is both comforting and liberating. The ghost of war permeates the narrative, and while the stories oscillate between different narrators and their perspectives, they all congeal at the end to re-affirm overarching preoccupations: the nearly ineffable nature of loss and the emotional disarray caused by fractured identities. The text almost echoes a postcolonial narrative, one that questions assimilated and hybrid identities as it substantiates the effects of colonization and/or globalization on the nation. Although each story is told from a different perspective, most of the stories remain faithful to the pursuit of charting Kuwait and Kuwaitiness on the cultural map. This is a very distinct Middle Eastern culture that is often neglected or dismissed from cultural studies and literature. As such, the collection is significant in its portrayal of Kuwaiti identities and the tensions between modernity and the nation’s history.

When comparing “Echo Twins” and *The God of Small Things* it is not difficult to find a parallel plot line and the similarity in their characterization of the two protagonists. In one essential similarity, the two are markedly different from your commonplace individual: both strike the reader as particularly bold and dangerous women. Their similarities stem from intertextual correspondence. Intertextuality maintains that texts are carriers of particular ideologies and cultures while at the same time speaking to and from each other. In *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen states that “authors do not create their texts from their own original minds, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts...in this sense, the text is not an individual, isolated subject, but rather, a compilation of cultural textuality” (p. 35). As such, there are pre-existent texts that both Al-Nakib and Roy write to and from, that is, the ambient cultural texts of transgression, colonialism, desire and their repercussions. Al-Nakib’s text speaks almost directly to Roy’s rendition of desire in a postcolonial setting, while Roy’s text fleshes out the ins and outs of their common theme of transgression. The dialogue between them is readily apparent.

To begin with, the characters speak to each other’s beliefs regarding sexual freedom. Hayat, like Ammu, is a rebel, an outcast, different from the rest of the women in the community. She was the only independent woman in a conservative society, uninterested in marriage. In Kuwaiti tradition and cultural norms, this is a taboo in itself: An unmarried woman is dangerous. An orphan already on the margins of society, she occupies a space beyond the norm:

The townsfolk wondered whether anyone would ever stoop so low as to marry the brazen orphan girl . . . But Hayat wasn't there for the taking. She had made the decision never to marry. Late at night, she would sneak out of her house, walk to an isolated scrap of shore, and plunge into the forgiving warmth of the Gulf. Some nights...she even dared to swim without clothes. She knew marriage would mean giving up midnight swims and cheeks to the sun. (p. 41)

In the case of the Indian woman, Ammu is divorced, not an orphan, but is described as a social anomie all the same. After her divorce “She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank . . . She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims” (p. 43). Both women enjoy the liquid space that engulfs them and separates them from society, disconnecting them from its norms. In other words, these “midnight swims” bring freedom. Swimming is reminiscent of a maternal space, of the womb, a place of all-embracing immersion. The protagonists' love for swimming is an indulgence in desire, an accessing of the semiotic *chora*, a stage wherein, as described by Julia Kristeva, the child cannot distinguish the difference between itself and the mother's body, a body that provides a peaceful, comforting space to alleviate the child's sense of disorientation. It is only in this sheltered space that these female characters are able to gain agency.

Thus, transgression is that crossing of boundaries described by Jenks, but it is also the breakdown of the border that separates self and other, it is the claiming of a third, shared space, of a place that redeems the maternal, the feminine, a protected space where the chaotic geography of love can be charted, a space crucial to women's reclaiming of the body and of the self. As such, it is a space that resists patriarchal traditions and taboos. When Hayat meets Alexander she is aware that he parallels her desire for crossing boundaries, for he is as “daring” as she is: “She turned to look back at this unusual Alexander, daring to follow an Arab woman in the streets . . . She walked over the raised threshold and left the door ajar, daring Alexander a little further” (p. 43). Hayat, like Ammu, dares to urge Alexander into her territory. Ammu waits for Velutha near the river, “as though her life depended on getting there in time. As though she knew he would be there. Waiting. As though he knew she would come. He did” (p. 314). Both female protagonists take their lovers, Alexander and Velutha, into the *chora*, away from the social structures that separate and divide. In asserting her power to attract the male to her own space, Hayat is able to disrupt the male/female power dynamics and initiate the sexual act, upsetting the mechanism of domination (usually the man dominates) and subjugation (normally the woman is subjugated). Hayat and Ammu are protagonists that shift the expected roles in the binary man/woman and instead step into a more active sexual role. They challenge gender roles and our expectations as readers and ultimately dismantle any preconceived notions of female protagonists and their relation to male characters. Rather than being defined in relation to the male characters, they are the center of each narrative, and the male characters function in relation to them, serving as tools for their subversive acts.

There are other acts of transgression committed by the female protagonists. But these transgressive love affairs are not simple acts of breaking rules or crossing barriers: there is a terrible cost associated with transgression. As Roy aptly puts it: “Two lives. Two children's childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders” (p. 318). The twins, Rahel and Estha, are forever traumatized by the breakdown of the family and the loss of their mother Ammu. Furthermore, Velutha is brutally murdered and the twins are separated from each other.

Both affairs are constructed in the narratives as a celebration of desire and women's socio-political agency. In the Kuwaiti narrative, when Hayat chooses Alexander, she has chosen the British man, the *other*. She calls him "Iskandar" re-naming him, appropriating him by adjusting his name to an Arab name (p. 44). In the same vein, Ammu's Velutha is "The God of Loss. . . The God of Small Things" (p. 208). The love between the couples is that of temporary happiness, transitory moments of pleasure and ecstasy. What happens after this transgression is that Alexander, like Velutha, is brutally beaten, harassed by the townsmen (although this is not explicitly told):

Alexander was seized firmly by the arms and escorted to an alley close by, not out of view . . . He was kicked solidly three times in the ribs and twice in the groin. . . . A stream of saliva, blood, and teeth seeped through his swollen lips . . . They had scared him, asserted their irrefutable ownership. (p. 45)

Order is re-affirmed and Alexander is put back into his place as the *other*, the colonizer, the British man. It is not Hayat who is punished. In the same vein, Velutha is the Untouchable who is beaten and murdered by the police. Ammu remains untouched, but is driven mad and eventually dies of heartbreak. The physical description of Velutha's murder is strikingly similar to that of Alexander's beating: "His skull was fractured in three places. The blood on his breath bright red . . . Both his kneecaps were shattered" (p. 294). Order is restored as the police attempt to correct the transgression and teach him a lesson: "they were exorcising fear . . . They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak" (p. 293).

The transgressions are dealt with in both narratives by agents of patriarchal societies; they act swiftly and violently to restore the social order. Both Indian society and Kuwaiti society have eliminated the transgressors, expelled them not only from the community but also from life, from the narrative. But both Alexander and Velutha, although expunged, continue to haunt the narratives. Ammu remembers Velutha, and her twins, so close that they seemed one person, evoked his memory throughout the years. He is never really gone. The novel shifts back and forth between the past and the present, dipping in and out of scenes, flashbacks, and memories. All along, the memories continue to reconstruct and recreate the trauma, the affair, the transgression that led to death, to loss.

Interestingly, in Al-Nakib's "Echo Twins" we are also introduced to twins, Mish'al and Mishari, two boys whose names begin with 'M'. The twins, like their mother, are immediately shunned, the products of a transgressive union. They were called "little yellow-haired, fair-skinned doubles" (p. 35). Everything that surrounds the twins is a repetition, an explicit dissolution of any boundary that might exist between them. Everywhere they went people looked with unease, as "uncanny repetitions generate discomfort" (p. 35). The twins' function in the story is to reiterate the borderless state of being for which Hayat longs. She has always repeated "One becomes two. Two becomes one" (p. 35). This is her mantra, her constant prayer, her repetitive line, the very same statement she teaches and repeats to Alexander, to whom she also refers as "Two-horned Alexander the Great" (p. 44). This emphasis on numbers and duality asserts the importance of presenting the boundary between self and other as an illusion; this is the female bringing the male to the *chora*, the place where there is no division, no separation between self/other. The power of the *chora* is in its allowing a break from constraints and divisions, even in language. This breakdown of borders is present in Hayat's repetitions and in her boys' speech.

The twins have an obsession with language. They speak together and echo each other's words: "The volume of their voices would decrease as the repeated portion of their statement or question shortened . . . Mama Hayat never seemed to notice her sons' echoed speech. Misha'l and Mishari spoke as one and their mother heard them as one" (pp. 33–35). Herein we find the splendor of the borderlessness of language, the breaking through borders and boundaries, the nuanced repetitions, the almost rhythmic movement of words. Even words are broken down into syllables when the twins echo each other's words:

"A compass."  
 "compass."  
 "pass."  
 "ss." (p. 52)

This breakdown of language's structural coherence is part of the transgressions in "Echo Twins." The boys do not adhere to the patriarchal structure of language, being, as they are, fatherless. They never ask about their father. He is absent and present, a secret letter that cannot be unfolded. He is the object, the space that is separate from their mother, from their liminal view of the world. Only at the very end of the story do the twins touch a part of their father's presence, tucked away in a secret box. Only upon the mother's death do they finally conclude that it is "time to go" (p. 53). It is now the right time, the moment where they must leave the maternal safe space, the *chora*. The object they find is a compass, a compass that is symbolic of Alexander's foreignness, otherness, and of his place outside of Kuwait. All the twins have is an object that stands in place of their father. Kristeva understands metaphor "as movement toward the discernible, a journey toward the visible" (Kristeva, 1987, 30). The object that is found is metonymic; it is an extension of the lost object/subject Alexander.

Analogous to Al-Nakib's fascination with language, Roy was a precursor in breaking open the language, in remolding English, claiming it, changing it and re-creating words and meanings. Roy does not pay attention to capitalization, spelling, "proper" usage of the English language, and repeats her words for emphasis. In that very act is a transgression. The twins Rahel and Estha speak as they wish and are always corrected by their aunt, Baby Kochamma. They find their own space, like Mish'al and Mishari; that space is the maternal space that fosters their connection to Ammu: "Because you're our Ammu and Baba and you love us double" (p. 142). This doubling is similar to Hayat's mantra of "one becomes two." The children in both texts are immersed in the mother's space.

Both Al-Nakib and Roy write in English, which is not their native language. As such, there is in both a process of transforming English, a process that is not equivalent in the two. Roy expresses this re-claiming of the colonizer's language clearly, while Al-Nakib's work does not reject its rules and boundaries, but uses rhythm, tone and repetitive utterances, expressed through the twins' childlike expressions, in order to disrupt it. Both Al-Nakib and Roy use poetic language and seem to oscillate between prose and poetry, meaning and meaninglessness. Both texts, in their speaking to and from each other - in their intertextualities - show the authors' rejection of any monologic manner of conceiving their narratives. When the twins speak and echo each other, the text makes use of 'double-voiced' discourse (Bakhtin's concept). Roy's novel, written in its rejection of chronology and structure, embraces dialogism in a network of different utterances and speech. Language itself is freed from constraints and rules and what emerges instead is a re-envisioning of spoken and written speech.

Hayat and Ammu are mothers to twins. They both symbolize the lost “motherland”. In Al-Nakib’s text, the motherland is the lost Kuwait, the longing is evident for the Kuwait that existed before the Gulf War, before its rapid turn towards “modernity”. Throughout the stories in *The Hidden Light of Objects*, Al-Nakib’s tone is one of lament, loss, nostalgia, and the desire to reclaim what has vanished. The ghost of old Kuwait ties all of her stories together. As the ghost of a lost Kuwaiti past hovers over every page, so does the ghost of a lost past hover over Roy’s India, a postcolonial nation that has undergone the trauma of colonization. That collective trauma is written into these private, personal acts of love and transgression, so the personal lives of Hayat and Ammu are essentially political. Both mothers are reclaiming a lost land, a lost identity, and are struggling for agency.

## Context

Al-Nakib’s text deals with old Kuwait: an unknown and mysterious Kuwait, one that remained secluded from the rest of the world until the post-oil era. Little is known about the lives of Kuwaiti women during the 1930s-1960s and only a few Kuwaiti historians have commented on women’s status during that time in history. In her work, Haya Al-Mughni offers an invaluable scholarly study of Kuwaiti women. I will refer to Al-Mughni’s sociological study to contextualize Kuwaiti women’s lives in a very small community. Women in Kuwait “lived their lives from birth to death in the mud-walled town. They knew nothing of the seafaring voyages, of the charm of Indian cities” (p. 44). Completely alienated from the outside world, there was barely any contact with men who were not relatives. In that sense, Hayat’s affair with Alexander is an intimate contact with the British, the colonists, and with a man who is not a relative. The British remained involved in Kuwait’s internal and external affairs “between 1909 and 1961” (p. 28). Because women were secluded from the public domain, they had no access to people outside of their immediate families and homes. Al-Mughni mentions that most Kuwaiti women did not have to work. They were relatively wealthy and as such stayed within the domestic sphere. This was the norm for women, and those who did work only did so at “Suq al-Harim (the women’s market), female traders gathered to sell their goods: “silk fabrics, kohl, henna, wooden combs” (p. 49). As such, the women’s market was the place where women experimented with business and experienced a certain sense of agency, however small. It comes as no surprise then that Al-Nakib chooses the women’s market as the place that Hayat meets Alexander. It is not an inconsonant setting; the market is an in-between place, a place between the public and private spheres.

Women’s bodies were also controlled and regulated by Kuwaiti traditions. No woman would leave the house unveiled: “Women had to drape themselves in a long black cloak, known as the *abbaya*, and veil their faces with a thick black cloth, the *boshiya*” (pp. 45–46). To leave the house without the *abbaya* would be a cultural transgression. Hayat does wear the *abbaya* but does not cover her face. She refuses to adhere to this social norm and claims ownership of her body through this simple (yet revolutionary) act. Al-Nakib uses this foreshadowing technique to set the stage for Hayat’s future transgressions. Hayat does not adhere to cultural norms and instead enters very dangerous territory. Hers is a transgressive and offensive body, one that is essentially the site of cultural nonconformity and functions as a rejection of society’s regulation of women. Bodies that do not conform are immediately annulled. Hayat’s rejection of the dress code for women is a part of her reclaiming of her body. A body that finds itself outside of the norm has the potential for claiming agency. If she is already crossing boundaries between normal/abnormal, good woman/bad woman, then she can push the envelope further. The first step is the rejection of the dress code, the second would be the

claiming of her body and going beyond all social taboos. This is a transgressive body that reclaims ownership of itself.

Hayat's union with Alexander is subversive in its crossing of boundaries, its transgressive willingness to defy social norms and taboos. Kuwait is a very small country, a closed community, a society that is not prone to miscegenation. Blood is pure and social hierarchies are clearly set. Hayat's rejection of these social rules is evident. No woman would dare to choose her life partner, let alone a man who is an *other*, a foreigner. In the same way, Ammu's cross-caste affair with Velutha brings to the fore the idea of personal transgressions versus public politics. By attempting to subvert the category of Touchable/Untouchable, Ammu and Velutha enter into the muddled arena where resistance to public politics transpires. Sadness permeates both texts. Desire eventually leads to death, to expulsion, and yet, at the same time, those transgressions live on. The transgressive affairs are passed on to the twins, to younger generations that are aware of the familial transgressions and of their dire consequences. Yet, in the end, the female protagonists Hayat and Ammu have inaugurated essential revolutions through intimate acts of love and desire.



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