

Dangerous Artisans: Anarchic Labour in Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Anil's *Ghost* and Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: In Michael Ondaatje's novels *The English Patient* (1992) and *Anil's Ghost* (2001) and Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), the figure of the skilled artisan labourer is spiritually elevated. This can be read in the light of Gandhi's Ruskin-inspired desire for all Indians to master the manual skills leading to self-sufficiency, which Gandhi developed into a political statement about non-violent resistance to colonial dominance. This paper argues that the spiritualized manual labour of the skilled artisan enables him to transcend social hierarchies, to the point where he becomes a catalyst for social upheaval. Within the disempowering trends of contemporary manufacturing, the figure of the highly skilled artisan pushes against the processes of globalization. Homi Bhabha's concept of a socially independent "Third Space" helps identify the true responsibilities of these characters.

Key Words: labour politics, globalization, Gandhi, postcolonialism, hybridity, artisan labour, Marx

This paper makes a comparative study of the textual representations of skilled labour in *The English Patient* and *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Both Ondaatje and Roy spiritualize manual dexterity in their economic, elegant descriptions of skilled labour. In these three novels a deep respect for manual adroitness directly challenges contemporary trends towards mechanized assembly-line manufacturing processes. In a postmodern world increasingly fascinated by yet disgusted with mass production and mechanical substitutes for laborious, traditional craftsmanship, the figure of the highly skilled artisan symbolizes rejection of international trends towards globalization and the elevation of the consumer over the producer of goods.

It seems unlikely that the exorbitant consumption of inexpensive products from the Third World will significantly decrease as production methods grow continually more automated and less dependent upon human skills. According to Frederic Jameson, "automation goes hand in hand with deskilling" (146). Through a careful analysis of fictional representations of specialist labour in these postcolonial novels, this paper will argue that a deskilled labour force is a disempowered and socio-

politically disadvantaged one; the figure of the highly skilled artisan, by contrast, represents a subversive element that challenges unnecessary mechanization.

Through their low-caste and Dalit artisan characters Ondaatje and Roy articulate alternative postcolonial identities that skew colonial binaries by emphasizing the empowering, revolutionary possibilities open to those with highly developed manual skills. Just as Gandhi recognized that mastery of manual skills could enable resistance to colonial domination, Ondaatje and Roy demonstrate in their novels that such expertise can contribute to the resistance of dominant cultural hegemonies. Their fictional characters rebelliously push the boundaries of their social status, and insist on being recognized as individuals. This peculiar space in which these artisan characters exist could be represented as isolating and disorienting, but Ondaatje and Roy have chosen rather controversially to write this as a space of intense creativity and dubious freedoms. There is a risk, however, of idealizing manually skilled craftsmen from formerly colonized countries as living in tune with their environment. As Graham Huggan points out in *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), the West is inclined to construct romanticized, marketable notions of the “other” as consumer products. In fact, however, training in technical skills that will eventually privilege entry into the artisan classes would be far more empowering than yet another variant of a nostalgic, unworkable William Morris *News from Nowhere*-style utopia.

The English Patient, *Anil's Ghost* and *The God of Small Things* all contain critiques of the assumption that skilled artisan labour of the developing world exists primarily to provide the first world with inexpensive, ‘othered’ cultural products. Virinder Kalra calls such goods “a morsel of cultural difference for the avaricious appetite of postmodern consumer culture” (2). To those amongst the western reading public blissfully unaware of the postmodern reality of Indian call-centres and multinational sweatshops, outdated images of homespun-clad villagers spinning peacefully, an idealization of subcontinental artisan labour, remain fiercely protected. There is huge capital at stake for writers willing to exploit these images, but Ondaatje and Roy avoid representing the skilled artisan figure as clichéd.

All the anarchic labourers who contribute to this concept of “dangerous artisans”—Kirpal (Kip) Singh, the Sikh bomb disposal expert from *The English Patient*, Ananda Udugama, the alcoholic gem-pit worker-turned sculptor/painter from *Anil’s Ghost*, and Velutha Paapen, the Untouchable carpenter from *The God of Small Things*—have in common certain traits: peerless manual skills, a tendency towards silence, and a stubborn insistence on maintaining personal integrity even amidst domestic violence and war. Although they do not share social or geographical positions, the skill-induced confidence which enables them to make radical decisions is common to all three. They all live on the edge and are involved in high-risk activities that build tension within the novels until they detonate. Velutha’s forbidden inter-caste love affair, Kip’s reversal of national loyalties, and Ananda’s attempted suicide are all examples of the volatile activities of these dangerous artisans. This article’s examination of the professional engineer/sapper Kip alongside casteless Velutha and manual labourer Ananda, far from discounting the centrality of the class/caste struggle, aims to illustrate the empowering *possibilities* of specialist manual skills in the battle to overcome social inequalities. These anarchic labourers cannot escape the situational peculiarities of their class/caste/race, but instead their *individuality* is able to be articulated through the narrative structures that Ondaatje and Roy use to represent their fictional worlds. In the characters’ disjointed relationship with the ancient social structures of traditional communities their anarchic possibilities are released.

Each of these fictional artisans stems from the Indian subcontinent. Kip is a Punjabi Sikh, a second son who cast aside his family’s expectations of his becoming a doctor, “an old tradition” (182). Instead, he joined a Sikh regiment in the British Army, and volunteered to sign up to a unit of engineers which dealt with delayed-action and unexploded bombs. He went to Italy as a sapper during World War II, having recognized that “Sikhs [. . .] were brilliant with technology [. . . and] have a mystical closeness [and] affinity with machines” (273). Ananda, on the other hand, is a Sri Lankan Buddhist who has risen from the symbolic pits of despair where he has been involved in the physically gruelling labour of mining gems. After suffering an injury, he shifted focus and became a

celebrated artist/sculptor performing the sacred task of painting the eyes on statues of the Buddha for the Netra Malaga ceremony. Ananda recognized that, due to his peculiar skills, “if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon” (304). Velutha is a Malayalee Indian carpenter, an Untouchable, Christ-like Paravan who slipped through the usual closed doors to gain a high school education and “a distinctly German design sensibility” (75). He worked as the well-respected handyman of a pickle factory, an unusual position for an Untouchable. Of these three, Velutha has the lowest social status, and thus the most to lose through his decision to ignore tradition; a decision that is fuelled by the false confidence that his extraordinary skills encourage.

Kip, Ananda and Velutha fulfil several roles in their socially privileged between-worlds positions. Firstly as a ‘deus ex machina’, moving the plot into new and explosive territory. Secondly as the disruptive catalyst, enabling challenges to the status quo. Lastly as the voice of narrative truth, providing a social conscience to the narratives. Their anarchic nature stems from the varying levels of social independence they acquire from their finely tuned manual skills. The uniqueness of their skill sets makes them in demand by all classes and castes within their respective societies, and gains them entrée into the spaces between social ranks: a virtual position of social hybridity.

It would be prudent at this point to introduce Jaina Sanga’s exceptionally clear definition of “hybridity”, as “the mixture produced when two or more elements are fused together [. . .] It implies a syncretic view of the world in which the notion of the fixity or essentiality of identity is continually contested” (75-76). This supports my notion of the social hybridity of skilled artisans as threatening the traditional social hierarchies of established communities. Hybridity itself offers a location for disparate elements to come together to form something altogether new. None of these three skilled artisans fit neatly into socially-defined categories. In each, several characteristics combine to produce surprising results. Kip’s relaxed Anglophilia mixes with extreme self-discipline; Ananda’s chaotic alcoholism combines with an intuitive gift for bringing the Buddha to life through the Netra Malaga ceremony; Velutha’s careful adherence of caste restrictions (until his inter-caste affair) leads him to unexpected Naxalite rebellion. Their identities are in flux, in a constant state of

redefinition. Benefiting from the fluidity of such a hybrid space, the dangerous artisan is able to move independently, free from many of the collective responsibilities of established societies, including those of his traditional community. Velutha and Ananda appear as working on a partially freelance basis, which allows some modicum of freedom from their employers' rigid schedules. Although Kip, Ananda and Velutha are consulted as specialists (Kip, as sapper; Ananda, as sculptor; Velutha, as both carpenter and handyman), their provision of skills and services for those from across the social spectrum who require them reinforces my contention that the skilled artisan is a social hybrid.

Within the fictional world of these skilled artisans, colonial power structures are 'inverted', as the binaries of head (i.e., the colonial centre, supposedly characterized by logical, rational thought) and hand (i.e., the skills of the colonized, which conveniently existed in part to supply the colonizers with inexpensive cultural products) are dislocated. The identities of the skilled artisans -- traditionally fixed by class distinctions -- are contested in the narratives, as ancient social bias is frustrated by the practical need for the services of those in a traditionally subordinate social rank. Kip is an exception here, as his is a privileged profession which is highly respected within British society. He acquires this status because of the intimate, physical, instinctive manner in which he approaches the tasks of his profession. It is Kip's physicality, the oneness he demonstrates as he deactivates the machines of war, that makes him an 'anarchic' labourer. He moves beyond the role of colonized Indian into the space of a dynamic, central cog in the British colonial machine. This disjointed and socio-culturally indeterminate position and a blurring of the insider-outsider binary are the essence of Kip's hybridity. The socially hybrid nature of these skilled artisans means that they inhabit what Homi Bhabha refers to in *The Location of Culture* (1994) as "The Third Space". Bhabha challenges readers to "remember that it is the [. . . in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of a culture [. . . .] By exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (38-39). He dares us to move beyond traditional binaries and search out a new dimension of social experience, one characterized by a lack of stasis.

The mobility that occupying such a theoretical in-between position makes possible enables the dangerous artisans to undermine the established communities from which they came. Pnina Werbner describes cultural hybridity as “an empowering, dangerous or transformative force” (4), saying that “hybrids not only raise consciousness; they are performatively powerful, fertilising or purifying” (21). Significantly, Werbner acknowledges both the *empowering* and the *dangerous* nature of hybridity, as if the only way of maintaining social cohesion/control is through the firmly held boundaries of traditional culture. This logic suggests that as the trend towards globalization renders the borders between cultures increasingly more fluid, the hybrid figure in postcolonial literature stands as a symbolic avatar of the postmodern condition, one characterized by a lack of stasis. The chaos represented by the social hybridity of these dangerous artisans provides fertile, spiritualized ground for growing discontent and restlessness.

Each of these novels provides fuel for a discussion of how the very human and individualistic manual abilities of the skilled artisan can be seen to contend with the ideology of globalization, with its focus on homogenizing disparate cultures and products. This is due to their anti-industrialist, pro-artisan themes that promote the individualism of fine craftsmanship as opposed to the sweatshop production methods preferred by multinationals. These economic giants allow their labourers access to only minute aspects of the manufacturing process, disempowering them by such reduced knowledge. The highly skilled artisans, on the other hand, are empowered by an intimate understanding and familiarity with every stage of their labours. This affords them dignity, self-respect and a certain amount of freedom.

Woven throughout these novels is a neo-Puritan fascination with labour for labour’s sake, arguably indicating these novels as conservative in nature. What defines them as such is the way in which the artisan labourers figure as individuals, never as part of any unit of organized collective labour. Velutha does join a Marxist march, but the fact that in *The God of Small Things* he acts largely autonomously has prompted Aijaz Ahmad to condemn Roy for her denigration of collective action and failure to offer any solution to poverty (Ahmad 1997). Kip, too, functions primarily on

his own, performing his tasks independently. Ondaatje describes the sappers as “an odd group as far as character went, somewhat like people who worked with jewels or stone, they had a hardness and clarity within them [. . .] They never became familiar with each other” (110). Although readers of *The English Patient* know that Kip is technically part of a larger team, he is rarely described in this context.

Also important in the depiction of these skilled artisans is the degree to which they are imbued with supersensory abilities. In his review of *Anil's Ghost* for *The New York Times*, Richard Eder recognizes Ondaatje's use of manual skills as literary tools, when he writes that “craft in the widest sense (art, perhaps, or labour's skills or a scientist's devotion) is illumination in the darkness of a world blood-drenched and fed on abstractions” (np). Such a consideration of craft necessarily imparts to these characters an air of heightened spirituality and connection with the very essence of life itself. Maureen Garvie describes the main characters in *The English Patient* as “extraordinarily attuned to the world's signals” (929), referring particularly to Kip, who has been blessed with “a hypernatural refinement of sight, hearing, and touch” (929). Kip's senses are so finely attuned to his environment that he picks up nuances of sound missed by his companions and is excruciatingly aware of the responsibilities this knowledge necessarily brings with it.

The apparent self-sufficiency of the skilled artisan is reminiscent of Gandhi's teachings in his influential pamphlet *Hind Swaraj* (1909). In this, Gandhi exhorted fellow Indians to develop hand-spinning and other manual skills as symbolic tools of practical independence against the ruling British Raj. Gandhi's original inspiration for his theories came directly from John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1862). He understood Ruskin's teachings to be as follows:

1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work

3. That a life of labour, i.e. the life of the tiller of the soil and the craftsman, is the life worth living (*My Experiments with Truth* 274-75)

The influence of Ruskin upon Gandhi's writings is undeniable. Both men envisioned the empowering potential of highly developed manual skills as tools of resistance. Both fought against the dehumanizing elements of industrialization. Gandhi fought against encroaching westernization and continued British rule of his beloved India. However, such idealism has earned criticism from postcolonial theorists such as Aijaz Ahmad who comments on *Hind Swaraj* in *In Theory* (1992), warning of the dangers of

a certain way of idealizing [the] past by eliminating all its material coordinates – that is to say, a certain strand of obscurantist indigenism which unfortunately surfaced in Gandhi's thought much too frequently; which was radically opposed to the way Marx thought of these matters; and which still lives today [. . .] under the insignia [. . .] of cultural nationalism and opposed [. . .] to strands of thought derived from Marxism (238).

Ahmad seems to argue here that many of Gandhi's "idealized" notions of the benefits of a manually-skilled population prevent rather than advance the development of a society's labour interests. His argument introduces a tension between the simplicity of Gandhi's teachings--for example, Gandhi's stubborn insistence on maintaining medieval technologies such as hand-ploughs--and the complexity of a revolutionary Marxist approach to changing society. But Ahmad does not recognize that the development of practical, manual, specialist skills can ensure a higher level of economic security and a future with more prospects of employment than would be possible for those lacking such skills. That Gandhi wished for every Indian citizen to develop the tools of self-sufficiency arguably indicates that his philosophy was not intended to be exclusive. Indeed, Gandhi's much-criticized

ideals were intended to empower the entire Indian population by offering an alternative to the yoke of British economic dependence.

In order to show the relevance of Gandhi's ideals to my argument, I should stress that Gandhi was not against industrialization in an anti-Marxist way. He simply argued that it was vital to India's economic and spiritual survival that the population's potential for manual labour not be overlooked in the search for more efficient means of production. Gandhi saw the onset of modernity through technological advance as a disadvantage to Indian society, for it was capable of completely undermining the use of India's human potential. Recalling a conversation with Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru explains:

As Gandhiji used to stress to us all the time: You talk about the machine, well, I am not against the machine, he would say, but we happen to have thirty crores (three hundred million) machines in India. Why should we not use them? They are the human beings who work [. . .] Now you may get a better machine per man or hundred men or over a thousand men, but you are wasting thirty crores [. . .] of machines, and they are not merely machines, they are human beings, who have to be fed, looked after [. . .] So [. . .] what is one to do with our labour potential? (quoted in Nanda 125)

From this, we can see that Gandhi's motivation for the development of manual skills was more practical than idealistic. Gandhi recognized that India's future depended not just on technical advancement but on the intrinsic skills of the population. If Indians could master all aspects of crafts such as spinning and weaving, then they would eventually maintain skills that even the fully-industrialized British textile mills would be losing: the ability to create the handspun, handwoven textiles that would become sought after, luxury products worldwide. Those artisans who can produce such items without over-dependence on mechanization serve as a force of resistance against the homogenizing global forces of manufacturing processes.

The social hybridity of the dangerous artisans, although it might appear to be at odds with organized labour, is not, however, in opposition to the traditional labour cultures of established communities. Instead, this hybridity stemming from sought-after skills bisects the line between traditional and hybrid cultures. The artisan values independence, freedom and his knowledge of all the means of production. Kip is a superb example of this, for his highly-developed technical skills simply could not be reproduced by any machine. He has painstakingly trained in all aspects of bomb design and disposal to ensure his comprehensive understanding of the processes involved. Although Kip is not an artisan in the traditional craft sense of the term, he can be identified with other anarchic labourers whose individuality and social hybridity stems from their peerless skills. Kip feels responsible for what he produces and he recognizes the intrinsic value of his abilities. These artisans value traditional craftsmanship, as opposed to the often poor-quality of routinely globalized factory line production methods.

It would be impossible to reflect upon this without acknowledging that the ravages caused by contemporary globalization make the ideal of self-sufficiency of individual countries or nations largely a myth. The realities of globalization and international economic interdependence, as well as the ever-present hunger for fossil fuels, ensure that global import/export markets are bustling, nearly always to the detriment of the Third World. In *Empire* (2001), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue:

When we begin to consider the ideologies of corporate capital and the world market, it certainly appears that the postmodernist and postcolonialist theorists who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty have been outflanked by the strategies of power. (138)

Such strategies of power are represented by money, and it is indeed very difficult to argue with capital. Yet Ondaatje and Roy stand out from other contemporary novelists in their privileging of

skilled labour, thereby helping to undermine the unquestioned acceptance in the West of the need for dehumanizing globalized production methods. Both writers have developed the skilled labours of hybrid characters into anthropomorphized platforms for addressing explosive social issues, specifically the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Marxist Naxalite uprisings, and the political killings during the Sri Lankan civil war. The characters become social commentators and voices of “narrative truth” through which Ondaatje and Roy tackle those issues that are too risky to address through a narrative persona.

Ondaatje makes use of this literary technique through his characterization of Kip whose arrival at the Villa San Girolamo in *The English Patient* symbolically resembles the deus ex machina of the ancient Greek theatre, in which a “god in a basket” was literally wheeled down onto the stage to repair plot damage or clear the vision of characters who had temporarily been blinded by foolishness. Ondaatje uses Kip to introduce more activity into the agonizingly slow routine of Hana’s nursing of her burned patient. Through his “mystical [. . .] affinity with machines” (272), Kip upon his arrival provides an awareness of human evil and the murderous potential of human inventions. His skills, at once technical, physical and spiritualized, offer him modest protection against the vacuum of the dehumanizing war machine that so deceptively separates destruction from those who destroy. Yet Kip is acutely aware of the consequences of the bomb. Clare Brandabur points out that “whole passages from the Sapper’s Manual for constructing and defusing bombs figure in Kip’s mental landscape” (97). Yet the true source of Kip’s empowerment lies not in the scientific knowledge of killing machines and their destruction, but in his intimate, intuitive command of the processes involved -- a true artisan’s understanding.

Kip’s reaction to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is arguably the passage in *The English Patient* that most powerfully condemns the experiment of social hybridity. As an Indian, Kip symbolically becomes the warrior mouthpiece for the invisible and unheard Asian victims of the bomb, even as he becomes a voice of narrative truth, imagining when he closes his eyes “the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it

meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air” (284). John Bolland has criticized Ondaatje for turning Kip into an abstraction –Asia—and forcing him to become a mouthpiece for his own antagonism to the perceived iniquities of Empire (73). Kip, ensnared by his technical virtuosity, has fallen into the trap of trusting the British colonial machine that praised his skills, talents and proficiency.

In the last few pages of *The English Patient*, Kip himself becomes a disruptive catalyst, a dangerous bomb ready to explode when the horrifying realities of war render normal life impossible. His arrival introduces the potentially problematic issue of race, which the conveniently indefinable ethnicity of the charred English patient had previously pushed into the background. Even Hana’s global vagrancy positions her as ethnically fluid. Kip’s technical virtuosity introduces the reality of the bomb and a physical reminder of a racialized “other” who could just as easily have been an enemy as an ally. This awareness within the text of the nature of explosives is crucial when considering the characterization of both Kip and Velutha. Kip defuses bombs; Velutha is a veritable bomb ready to go off. Within such characterizations, stasis is impossible. These dangerous artisans are potential troublemakers. Their innate mobility as disruptive catalysts who threaten the established order of settled communities, along with their social hybridity and finely honed technical skills, ensure that upheaval follows them

An example of this effect can be found in the role that Velutha plays. In what could be conceived as a critique of Ahmad’s hard-line Marxist attack on Gandhi’s efforts to reshape the Indian mentality via manual labours, Arundhati Roy has created an exemplary artisan character who syncretizes the socially revolutionary worlds of Gandhi and Marx. Velutha, the novel’s symbolic “god of small things”, possesses both the empowering manual skills so cherished by Gandhi, and the dissatisfaction with the status quo so necessary for any self-respecting Marxist. Velutha’s manual skills afford him some modicum of resistance against the western-style anti-Gandhian industrialization of the Paradise Pickles and Preserves Company. Roy symbolically uses the enthusiastic but naïve pseudo-Marxist Chacko, fresh from England, to introduce this dehumanizing,

mechanized approach to the previously successful –and manual—cottage industry. Although this example verges on the sentimental, Velutha and Mammachi (Chacko’s mother and the gentle, sleeping partner in the business) with her kitchen-table approach to manufacturing, represent the unsuccessful opposition to such unwelcome homogenization.

Velutha is the disruptive catalyst who brings to light both the business failure of the pickle factory and the dishonest cruelty inherent in the Kochamma family. Without Velutha’s actions, the truth would not have come out into the open. The forbidden, inter-caste love affair with Ammu which he embarks upon, for example, exposes the hypocrisy within the Syrian Christian social system in Kerala in the 1960s. Both he and Ammu occupy dangerous hybrid positions: Velutha has a position of power unusual for an Untouchable, due to his carpentry skills and responsibility as a factory handyman, while Ammu’s divorced status and refusal to accept the illogicality of the love laws as strictly defined by her society also make her interstitial. Brinda Bose points out that “desires — particularly ‘personal’ ones — have always been severely underrated in comparison to revolutions, particularly those in which the underclasses unite to lose their chains” (60), an observation which their subversive love affair in *The God of Small Things* exemplifies. Having failed to obtain a fairer society through Marxism, Velutha makes the fatal decision to seek it through forbidden love. Ammu’s decision to initiate the love affair with him is politically reckless because of their caste discrepancies, but Velutha’s decision to meet her halfway is even more so.

As an Untouchable functioning within a Touchable environment, Velutha has everything to lose. Most crucially, he is in danger of losing the invisible protective barrier that has surrounded him all his life, and indeed as soon as he and Ammu embark upon their physical union, this space is shattered forever. It is crucial here that we realize that Velutha’s confidence that allows him to transgress social boundaries stems from his desirable manual skills. His creations are so valued by the upper-caste Syrian Christian Kochamma family that when they accept the results of his labours, a crack in the caste armour appears that allows Velutha to slip through into the unknown – to him -- realms of Touchability. Velutha has not only created the rosewood dining set and the traditional

Bavarian chaise lounge so cherished by Mammachi, but also many of the cherished possessions of the established Syrian Christian community of Ayemenem. Amongst his creations that so symbolically represented his hybridised social position and the high regard in which Velutha is held are “a stack of wire-framed angel’s wings that fitted onto the children’s backs like knapsacks, cardboard clouds for the Angel Gabriel to appear between, and a dismantlable manger for Christ to be born in” (75).

It is no accident that these items, carefully crafted by Untouchable hands, are all designed to come into physical contact with Touchable bodies. Although Velutha has control of the entire process of manufacturing his creations, his lack of caste status prevented the empowerment usually associated with the real artisan. Certainly he enjoys far more social freedoms than most skilled labourers of his social status, but Roy’s bitter critique of the hypocrisy of the fictional Syrian Christian world in her native Kerala clearly highlights her frustration with the injustice of an ancient caste system that condemns certain citizens to lives of drudgery simply because of an accident of birth. Roy’s representation of Velutha as an artisan pushing against the restrictive boundaries challenges not only the traditional caste distinctions but also postmodern distinctions of globalized class systems and systems of production.

Ondaatje’s most recent novel, *Anil’s Ghost*, offers the final example of how the spiritualized manual labour of a dangerous artisan is located in opposition to homogenized, mechanized production methods. Ondaatje introduces the theme of skilled labour serving as a magical entrée into a privileged world through the character of Ananda Udugama, the alcoholic gem-pit worker-turned-sculptor. Against the bloody backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, Ananda is characterized as broken by the twin monsters of grief and alcohol. He is sought out by a team of forensic anthropologists in need of his intuitive skills as a sculptor, to recreate in clay the head and face of a skull believed to have belonged to a victim of a political murder. No dehumanized machine could possibly have the primal instincts and manual dexterity required to perform such a sensitive task. Ananda’s artisan skills empower him to resist the mechanization of labour, as well as the impatience

of white-collar professionals. The skilled hands of the artist/artisan are the only tools capable of succeeding in such an endeavour, to the extreme frustration of the scientists who commissioned Ananda for this work.

The degree to which the forensic scientists depend upon Ananda's legendary skills comes to light when the clay facial reconstruction is completed. Still in shock over his wife's unexplained disappearance three years earlier, Ananda works through his grief in the process of completing the commission, replacing the agenda of the scientists who require his results for their own research. The forensic anthropologist, Anil, is aghast when "she realised the face was in no way a portrait of [the victim], but showed a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim" (187). By honouring his wife's memory with the skills of his hands, Ananda affords himself an element of self-respect. No one else in Sri Lanka at that time had the skills to perform the required task, so the team becomes temporarily subordinate to him. Such dependence causes Ananda to be in some ways socially hybrid, as he becomes a crucial member of their normally tightly-closed research community. Despite his silence, due to grief and alcoholism, he retains power over the professionals.

Ondaatje's characterization of pre-industrial skilled labour in *Anil's Ghost* reads like a respectful tribute to the homeland he left as an adolescent. He uses Ananda to purvey silent narrative truth. Ondaatje gives voice to the victims of the Sri Lankan civil war, whose bodies were strung up under bridges mined with explosives and left decapitated, the heads impaled on posts visible to anyone tempted to speak out against the government. Ananda rises from the depths of despair to become a celebrated artist who performs the sacred task of painting the eyes on statues of the Buddha. He is initially brought in to attempt a reconstruction of a Buddha statue that has been looted by hungry thieves, a commission which arguably symbolizes the attempt to reinstate a colonial infrastructure within a community evolving an independent postcolonial identity. Ananda's decision to use his skills to revitalise the reconstructed Buddha also enables him to find his own voice and shed his subalternity. His artisan skills constitute a form of expressive, silent speech, which, in being

used for the good of the community, opens up a new vision for him. In the same manner as Kip and Velutha, Ananda discovers that silence is often more articulate than speech in conveying truth.

All three characters possess childlike qualities. They all represent feminized males, and this feminization of the skilled masculine character can be seen as yet another way of “inhabiting” Bhabha’s Third Space. With quirky irony, both Ondaatje and Roy recognize and celebrate “feminized” labours through the ‘intersexed’ qualities of Kip, Ananda and Velutha, in acknowledgement of the traditional invisibility of women’s labour. The femininity of these characters lies more in their spiritual approach to the tasks at hand than in the work itself. Several signifiers point to this: Kip’s long “ribbons of wheat” Sikh hair, Velutha’s painted “AC/DC” nails, and Ananda’s “delicate” fingers. All three slip between the traditional binaries of masculine and feminine, much as they slip between ranks of the traditional social hierarchy. This sexual hybridity is yet another tool used by Ondaatje and Roy to reiterate the unfixed identities of these characters. The theoretical Third Space fuelling their social freedom of expression enables behaviour that would be unimaginable for those who remain within strict social confines.

In the light of Gandhi’s Ruskin-inspired vision of political and social independence through spiritualized manual labour, readers of these novels are challenged to reconsider previously held notions of the value of skilled manual work. In a society uncomfortably characterized by mass production and inexpensive consumer items, the example set by fine artisan craftsmanship presents an alternative to sweatshop-produced goods. Of the many positive results of industrialization, the development of artisan skills for the empowerment of the individual seems to have been neglected. The weakness of an idealized approach to specialist labour demands recognition, but maintaining a goal of personal independence through a highly accomplished and motivated workforce is one step towards a potentially stronger and more ethical society.

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