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**Author(s):** Billie Armstrong

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## Sensual engagement as synthesis with the natural world in Arundhati Roy and Ali Smith

Billie Armstrong

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Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Ali Smith's *Autumn* are ecologically engaged works of fiction which can be said to endorse a synthesised mode of existence with the natural world. By drawing contrasts between engaged sensory perception and hidebound human conceptualisations of the world, Roy and Smith highlight how the latter are often informed by fear of the unknown. In *The Spell of The Sensuous*, David Abram awakens us to the ecological importance of synthesis with the natural world through sensory experience, which has largely been abandoned as a mode of perception in favour of modern, human-centric modes of living. Roy and Smith create moral distinctions among characters according to their relationship with the natural world, and drawing on Abram's illuminating acknowledgement of sensory perception, this article explores how such distinctions establish an aspiration towards a new ecological and political ethic which is grounded in empathy and respect for all matter that humans encounter.

Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1996) are novels in which sensual engagement is portrayed as a unique mode of human access to the natural world. Sensory perception appears to be privileged over language as a mode of synthesising human experience and natural matter, as "things" transcend the notion of being as linguistically or conceptually defined by humans. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram draws on the phenomenology and philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to describe the act of sensual engagement with the material world as a "ceaseless dance between the carnal subject and its world", alluding to the participation of both the human and the material in sensual perception.<sup>1</sup> His argument that the material world, or "things", are as much complicit in the act of sensory perception as the human vessels who receive them is part of a wider case for a renewal of felt human connection with the natural world whereby we understand ourselves to be a component of the material world, rather than regarding this world as an external object of our will and exploits. In these novels, Roy and Smith present a relationship in which this kind of synthesised sensory exchange between characters and the natural world is explored; they use this engagement with the senses and the natural world to ground their rejection of the world as a set of "human" political and social constructs.

In *Autumn*, Smith deals with the topical political narrative surrounding Brexit. The "present" sections of the novel are set in the weeks following Britain's decision to leave the EU, and through the disengagement with human constructs both social and conceptual the novel interrogates the divisive attitudes which led to this decision. This political focus plays a key part in her wider questioning of the human tendency to conceptually divide. The characters whose experiences form the majority of the novel, Elisabeth and Daniel, are presented as having an elevated consciousness because of their ability to transcend boundaries and engage on an acute sensory level with the language and material matter they encounter. The sensually engaged way in which Daniel and Elisabeth view the world disengages with any fixed concepts of time, place and boundaries. Smith attempts to show how such fixed concepts extend to unjust human hierarchies, which are grounded in human privilege and are ultimately a manifestation of fear of thinking outside human boundaries. Abram points to objective

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BILLIE ARMSTRONG is a fourth-year student at the University of Glasgow studying towards an honours degree in English Literature, with plans to pursue a postgraduate study focusing on ecology in culture and literature.

<sup>1</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 65.

scientific method as an approach that disengages from understanding the world phenomenologically and which places humans hierarchically above non-humans. Even within this though, there are humans who are associated more closely with the non-human, and are thereby disempowered within human culture: the result is a generalised fear both of “disordered experience” and of an “other” that might equal sentence, and therefore equal rights to protection, as ourselves:

Arguments for human specialness have regularly been utilized by human groups to justify the exploitation not just of other organisms, but of other humans as well (other nations, other races, or simply the ‘other’ sex)[...] Such justifications for social exploitation draw their force from the prior hierarchicalization of the natural landscape, from that hierarchical ordering that locates “humans”, by virtue of our incorporeal intellect, above and apart from all other, “merely corporeal” entities.<sup>2</sup>

This “human specialness” that Abram essentially rejects provides the crucial intersection between eco-politics and human politics in these texts. To understand the world sensually is to accept that interaction with all life, be that other humans, animals, or material “things”, is to be part of a synthesised exchange of sensual energy rather than an objective exchange between sensor and inanimate subject. Thus, we see how “such hierarchies are wrecked by any phenomenology that takes seriously our immediate sensory experience”.<sup>3</sup> Roy and Smith create character binaries which represent opposing modes of human perception in order to show how a lack of sensual awareness and synthesised experience with natural matter—which is grounded in fear—results in a lack of empathy or regard for that which is alien or unknown, be that the natural world or people.

In *God of Small Things*, Roy presents the experience of an Untouchable in Kerala who himself is extremely engaged sensually, and in ways able to transcend his position in society through his deep understanding of “things”. Roy sets up an opposition between Velutha’s sensual self and the conceptualised prejudices which seek to destroy him. Baby Kochamma is the character antitheses to Velutha in that she engages with people and “things” around her in the most mediated way possible. Even her engagement with the natural world is one mediated by western culture and objective human relations with the natural world; she previously was known for her garden which she rigorously maintained in India, after receiving her horticultural college education in America. She allows this garden to lay waste when she discovers a new vessel to connect her with Western culture: the television. She is content to have her emotions and desires manipulated by the television, an object that represents the safety and dominance of human technology to her. It renders the vastly complicated world small and familiar to her, she can access the western cultures she aspires so deeply to emulate with the flick of a button. She locks her windows and doors to protect her material possessions from thieves; through this paranoid action Roy implies that Kochamma’s fixations arise from fear rather than fascination. Her paranoia represents a fear of difference infiltrating her familiar space of carefully upheld social values and western worship. We often glimpse this fear of difference and how it extends to a fear of the natural world:

Baby Kochamma was in her room, sitting up in bed, filling in a Listerine discount coupon that offered a two-rupee rebate on their new 500ml bottle [...] Giant shadows of small insects swooped along the walls and the ceiling. To get rid of them Baby Kochamma had put out the lights and lit a large candle in a tub of water. The water was already thick with singed carcasses.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo HarperCollins, 1997), 296.

Here, the stark contrast between the way she engages with the mundane consumerist coupon scheme and the way she immediately perceives “small” things to be sinister—she doesn’t hesitate to subject the insects to a brutally depicted death—shows how she cuts off her own participation in the animated conversation with the world. She chooses a mediated notion of the world, in which unruly nature is relegated in favour of the security of technology, and social position. In relation to Abram, who notes:

We conceptually immobilize or objectify the phenomenon only by mentally absenting ourselves from this relation, by forgetting or repressing our sensuous engagement. To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to engage us and to provoke our senses; we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being.<sup>5</sup>

Baby Kochamma rejects the unpredictable “life world” in favour of a world in which material things and people are conceptualised for her through cultural and social archetypes. We see that her hierarchy of things, demonstrated by her affiliation with cream buns and Listerine, and her aversion to insects, extends to humans. She holds Sophie Mol—a child who she has never met and has no emotional connection to in terms of reciprocal experience—in inordinate esteem because of what she represents: that is, her own connection to the western world and the colonial authority that this relation ties her to. Estha and Rahel, on the other hand, are subject to her mistreatment, manipulation, and suspicion because they represent the shame of Ammu’s failed marriage; a social ill which she cannot overlook. She disengages with them because they do not fit her socially ambitious principles, and therefore they instill fear in her because of the disorder they represent under her own roof. Crucially, she overlooks Velutha as an equal human being altogether because of his socially conferred status as an untouchable; as such she feels no obligation to consider him with mutual human compassion or regard. Baby Kochamma demonstrates the wider implications of a lack of sensual engagement with the “life world” on its own terms. By viewing the world through her adopted concepts and social hierarchies, she chooses to disengage with the sentience of other beings and people. Her view of them as other beings in conceptual terms becomes a justification of her treatment of everything and everyone around her as objects for her exploitation and manipulation.

Velutha presents the character antitheses to Baby Kochamma. He is markedly sensual, he has an intimate and visceral relationship with the natural, material world in the text. He demonstrates an acutely aware relationship with natural matter, “[...] he always seemed to know what smooth shapes waited inside the wood for him. They loved the way wood, in Velutha’s hands, seemed to soften and become as pliable as Plasticine.”<sup>6</sup> This instance in which the wood seems to transcend its material composition when touched by Velutha, and the idea of formed shapes “waiting” in the wood for him emblematises the kind of synthesis with the natural world that Roy advocates and suggests the kind of reciprocal relationship between human and “thing” that Abram describes: “Perception in this sense, is an attunement or synchronization between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves, their own tones and textures.”<sup>7</sup> This attunement that Velutha exhibits with things allows him to transcend boundaries both material and human; his deft craftsmanship allows him to be employed in Mammachi’s factory, which is considered “a big step for a Paravan,” and it is through sensual attraction that he transcends the social boundary between himself and Ammu.<sup>8</sup> As he emerges from the water to meet Ammu in this erotically charged depiction of their meeting on the riverbank, Roy refers back to his reciprocal relationship with things, and his synthesis with the natural world as the markers of his beauty: “the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. [...] He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. [...]

<sup>5</sup> Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 54.

<sup>8</sup> Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 77; *Paravan* is another word for the untouchable caste in Kerala.

it according to human social conceptions, signalling a lack of ability to engage with the unfamiliar.<sup>13</sup> Daniel, on the other hand, instills in Elisabeth a mode of being and thinking that is insatiably curious and drawn to unfamiliarity. Elisabeth is a child on the cusp of adopting the closed and non-associative worldview of her mother, one which subscribes to the idea of a singular truth: “There is no point in making up a world, Elisabeth said, when there’s already a real world.”<sup>14</sup> Daniel responds by encouraging her to view the world as a continuum of varying perspectives rather than as a linear structure which holds a singular truth: “Whoever makes up the story makes up the world, Daniel said, so always try welcome people into the home of your story.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, we see the terms in which Daniel and Elisabeth come to view the world around them: as a story which does not give narrative privilege to any one truth or being.

This non-entitled view can be extended to the way they view nature: their perception of the world as a highly animated one is intimately reciprocal. Whilst her mother is engrossed in a TV show in which celebrities are being interviewed whilst being driven in vintage cars, Elisabeth fixates on the cow parsley that lines the road. While the cow parsley is “incidental” to the focus of the show—the aggrandised humans in the vintage car—it takes on profound meaning for Elisabeth, not despite this but because of it: “this incidentality is, Elisabeth finds herself thinking, a profound statement.[...] The cow parsley has a language of its own, one that nobody on the programme or making the programme knows or notices is being spoken.”<sup>16</sup> At this stage she cannot articulate to herself what this profound quality is, but she is able to engage with the idea that Abram posits about the natural, material world: the incidental subject of her perception is in fact an active entity with a life force—a language—of its own. Later, she revisits the house which has been vandalised with the words “GO HOME”—an example of the aggressive and racially divisive attitudes towards immigrant families which gained momentum in Britain after the vote to leave the EU—to see a defiant response: “she sees that underneath this someone has added, in varying bright colours, WE ALREADY ARE HOME THANK YOU and painted a tree next to it and a row of bright red flowers underneath it.”<sup>17</sup> The implication that “home” is not something that can be defined by birthplace, immigrant status, or, in a wider sense, by manmade borders of place; Smith highlights the human feelings of entitlement to space that impels this kind of hostility towards immigrants in the first place. The human imperative to divide, conceptualise and “claim” space is a fundamentally hubristic and anthropocentric one. The painted response is as much sensual as it is verbal to Elisabeth. The painted red flowers spark a memory of the cow parsley and a Pauline Boty painting in her head, and at this point she begins to make vital connections between sensual engagement and the space she inhibits:

thinking about cow parsley, the painted flowers. Something about the use of colour as language, [...] the wild joyful brightness painted on the front of that house in a dire time, alongside the action of a painting like that one by Boty, in which a two-dimensional self is crowned with sensual colour.<sup>18</sup>

Elisabeth begins to see the vitality of the senses to human experience; they offer infinite dimension compared to human constructs like self as well as language. As she makes these connections, “it is the first time she’s felt like herself for quite some time” and it is at this point of unbounded synthesis with the natural matter around her that she is confronted by a literal human constructed border in the form

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<sup>13</sup> Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 83.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

of electrified fences.<sup>19</sup> She walks alongside the fences, noticing the “weed and flower comeback is everywhere” as if the land itself is actively resisting these divisive, manmade, chain-link structures.<sup>20</sup> A black SUV blocks her path and the man inside accuses her of trespassing on private land, to which she responds by undermining and questioning all of his authorial threats: “You’re in direct contravention. He says. Of what? Elisabeth says. And whatever you say I’m in. Well. It looks like from here you’re in prison.”<sup>21</sup> Through Elisabeth’s tongue-in-cheek responses, Smith is able to question the assertive nature of authority over space itself, and in relation to the ecological context of the novel this further suggests that human divisions of space are restrictions on freedom. The suggestion that he is in prison is a literal reference to the fences they have enclosed the land with, but also suggestive of the conceptual prison that this authoritative figure is in; he is cold and disengaged through his authorial feelings of responsibility over the space. Smith raises the ecological question of anthropocentric versus bio-centric “claim” to land through synthesised exchange. We see the predatory intentions of the authorial figure, who has legal claim to the land but no sensual connection to it. He is physically separated from it by his vehicle—a man-made “middle man” in the human navigation of space—and views it as external matter that can be divided by fences in order to reinforce his authority over it. This is contrasted to the bio-centric claim of the unauthorised walker who engages with it on a reciprocal, sensual basis. Smith seems to allude to the privilege of this sensual experience of the land. The man makes various threats but takes no physical measures to forcibly remove Elisabeth. The passage closes with the land becoming an active presence in their “saying nothing”, returning to Elisabeth’s notion of the cow parsley’s profound “incidentalness”: “The little white flowers is the tops of their stalks, she doesn’t know what they are but they’re saying their fresh nothing. The buttercups say it merrily. The gorse says it unexpectedly, a bright yellow nothing.”<sup>22</sup> It is here we see how Smith demonstrates Abram’s notion that to sensually engage is to be in conversation. The senses become Elisabeth’s mode of access to the world around her: Smith’s use of vivid adjectives to describe the way in which the flora say “nothing”, and indeed the description of “*nothing*” as “bright yellow”, implies that nothing is in fact something, and that the flowers are speaking a language that can only be sensed, not rendered by language.<sup>23</sup> Thus, by privileging Elisabeth’s sensuous experience with the land, it can be seen how Smith strives for an ecological ethic which is grounded in synthesised experience with the natural world, through the senses. It is by becoming attuned to her innate mode of perception that Elisabeth is able to question the human constructs that restrict her freedom on the land. When she connects the painted flowers outside the vandalised home to the cow parsley in order to show how sensuality is communicative, she implies that the human claim to land should be less to do with border drawing and whose “HOME” is where, and more inclined towards synthesised and sensual engagement with the natural matter in space.

In engaging in synthesis with matter, as Abram suggests, we are more inclined to overcome our constructed concept of space as an inanimate set of resources. *Autumn* presents natural matter and human life within the field of this matter as a constantly regenerating continuum of sensory experience and connection. We see Daniel in hospital in a kind of in-between life and death state throughout the novel, and occasionally enter the thoughts that are taking place inside his head. In one instance, he asks “God” to remind him of his sister’s name, and he receives a reply from “the silence”. This “silence” goes on to describe itself as all the matter that has ever existed and all the matter that ever will exist; “the silence” is in fact the synthesised energy of all matter, it claims to be “all the leaves”. The “silence” that speaks to Daniel, and the “bright yellow *nothing*” that speaks to Elisabeth is a shared

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 143.

<sup>23</sup> My emphasis.

energy with matter, and as engaged individuals they are attuned to silent language of the senses. Like Velutha's belonging to the world which belongs to him in *God of Small Things*, Smith presents their sensual awareness as a kind of oneness with the space that they inhabit. These characters' relationships with the natural world embody an active combination of what Merleau-Ponty refers to as "the flesh of the World", and David Abram's notion of "Spell of the Sensuous."<sup>24</sup> As such, these texts show how through unmediated synthesis with the natural world we can hope to overcome the damaging implications that human imposed "love laws", constructs and hierarchies have both on our human relations and our collective "home". ■

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<sup>24</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968).