the jacket summary evokes.

And Mother Figures? Archetypal, Sonless Mother in patriarchal Society (allegorised not just in Fatima's mother, but also in Sigeema and the Queen in one of the folk tales) is more central to the novel than the specific 'sonless mother' of Fatima. So, the emotionally loaded term 'tragedy' used in the jacket summary does not really apply to The Tent. Tragedy presupposes three-dimensional characters with whom you can sympathise, development, conflict and so on. All we know about Fatima's pale mother, all Fatima herself knows about her, is that she sobs all day in her dark room, probably because of all the miscarriages she has had. Hardly material for 'tragedy'. Neither, grow fond of her, though we do, is Fatima. A psychic condition which goes from bad to worse and finally, to worst simply cannot be plotted against the tragic curve.

Women, Bedouin, sonless and oppressed, patriarch - and a *Western* woman. If the jacket summary did not spotlight her, a less 'sophisticated' reader, while obviously noticing Ann's strange presence in the novel would have placed her on equal format footing as, say, Mouha the gypsy and may well have asked: 'just what is this unlikely, anomalous foreigner doing in a tale of cloistered Bedouin women?' An 'academic' reader however, would quickly recognise that though her appearance in the novel is quite brief, Ann is being used to make a (by now perhaps trite) point, namely: though power is gendered (men tend to have more power to make life-affecting decisions than do women especially in 'traditional society'), nonetheless, 'male' is a social construct, and women can occupy a subjugative 'male' position vi-a-vis other women. Hakima with her prodding cane and Ann are such women - except that Ann is also a Westerner an 'Orientalist' who educates a native because she wants her horse and also that she can amuse her with exotic folk tales and songs, a Westerner whose knowledge of modern health practices leads to Fatima's (already gangrenous) leg being amputated. The jacket summary packaging of the novel simply mirrors what a post-colonial/feminist reading of *The Tent* would, inevitably, do: it zooms in on Ann, even if Ann is as insubstantial a shade in Fatima's sensitive, fragile psyche as are the other characters, even if Fatima is already pretty well oppressed, marginalised and schizophrenic long before Ann comes into picture.

There is something in this novel for everyone - even for the incorrigible Orientalist Western male who might voyeuristically want the 'intimate glimpse inside the women's quarters' which the jacket promises. For the 'average' reader who does to want to be taxed with a high dose of complexity or ambiguity, there are beautiful images, a myriad of lovely tales and symbols that do not overwhelm by their density. A reader who would be put off by the kind of novel that goes down well with a 'politically correct' audience while at the same time retaining a veneer of exotica to appeal to the Orientalist in us all, would do well not to heed the signs on the jacket summary of this edition of *The Tent*. Instead of heeding them, the reader can go straight from the jacket cover, beautifully illustrated by Hod Lutfi, to the elegantly translated 'thing itself'.

Elmessiri writes for M Ahvam Weekly in Egypt

Writers, Natives and Former Colonies

BY JOHN OTU

Karen King-Aribisala, KICKING TONGUES, Heinemann (African Writers Series), Portsmouth, USA, 1998, 244pp

Arundhati Roy, THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS, Flamingo, London, 335pp

PART of the exhilaration and enduring beauty of well-told tales is in the ability of the story-teller to devise apparently new props with which to reformulate the tale. When the mode of narration has become fixed perhaps because of its ubiquity, there is the possibility that even fresh ideas which the author throws up would inadvertently be demystified.

Only few readers would be willing to go the whole hog and, of course, fewer critics approve the author's power of inventiveness

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<< in such a situation. Moreover no matter how barren or uninteresting are the ideas underscored by any given writer, her/his readiness to weave new structures to encapsulate the seeming ordinary message would cause many readers to applaud her/his craftsmanship.

Two women writers unique in some ways but sharing a number of qualities, prominent of which is the fact that they are natives of some of the world's former colonies, compel an exploration of two recent novels, the work of the two authors- *Kicking Tongues* is

Karen King-Aribisala's latest work and *The God of Small Things* the only published fiction so far by Indian author Arundhati Roy which won the Booker prize in 1997.

King-Aribisala's *Our Wife and Other Stories* had earlier in 1990/91 also won the Commonwealth Writer's prize for the Best First Book category (African Region).

She (King-Aribisala) is for her own part both Guyanese and Nigerian, the dual heritage, a result of her marriage to a Nigerian. Hence it is little wonder that their stories reflect the

rich folk style reminiscent of the pristine tales told in Africa and the diaspora. And, by

extension, a subversion of traditional Western modes of narration even though, in King-

Aribisala's case, there is the veneer of the structure of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* Which is why the two writers can be read as partly adding to the swelling corpus of post colonial literatures. The caveat is used partly because while it is safely arguable that their modes of narration reflect the eclectic and unpredictable heave of folktales, the texts nevertheless underscore messages of universal applicability.

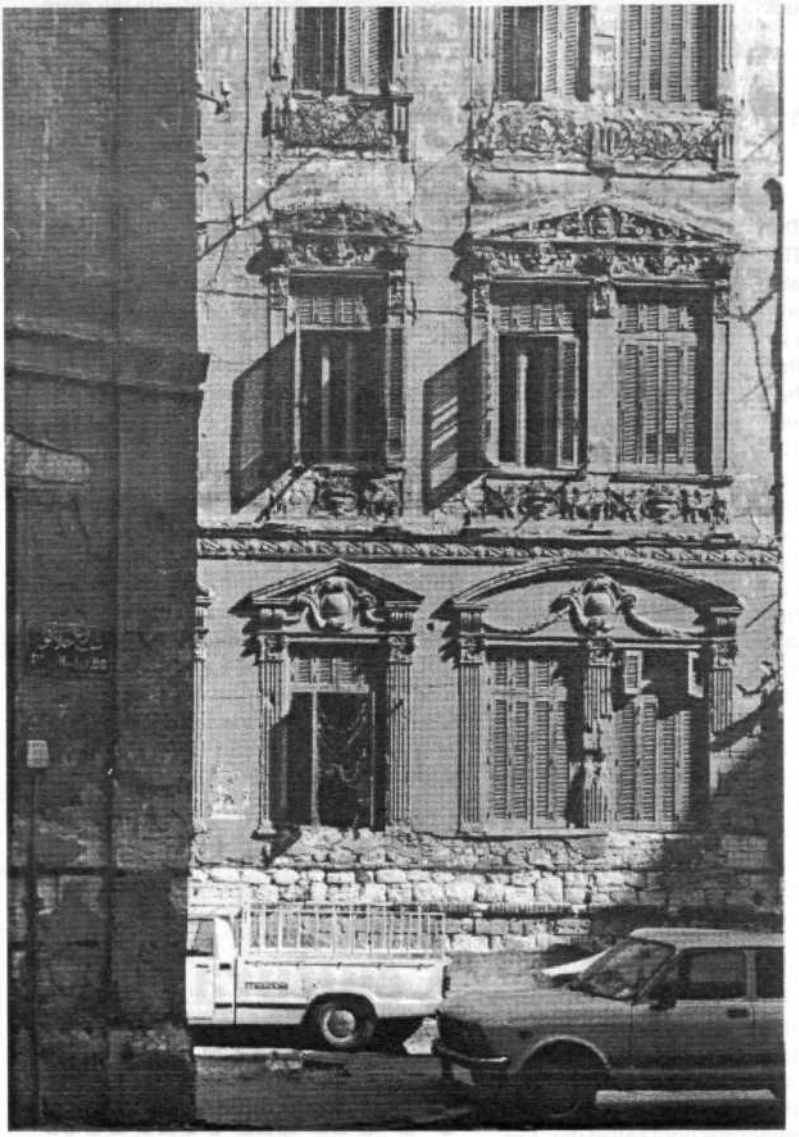
In *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy tells the story of the caste system prevalent in India in which the Paravans (the untouchables) are discriminated against in virtually all

spheres of life by the Brahmins (the freeborn). Roy symbolically puts the two against each other with the Brahmins, of course, defeating the Paravans and thus, perpetuating, the segregationist system. This is quite a commonplace theme, especially in India. But Roy transforms what otherwise could have been a dreary and uninteresting discourse into a lilting if suspenseful narration. The text confounds even the most assured reader in that it rigmorales and hedges like a coquette. The reader of Roy's novel cannot pre-determine, even by a clever guess the heave and breath of *The God of Small Things.* This is because the novel defies the orthodox structure of beginning, middle and end. In fact, the beginning is the end and the end, the beginning, validating T.S. Eliot's dictum in 'Little Giddying' that in our beginning, is our end. The author marshals one signifier, suspends it in mid-stream, introduces a seemingly countervailing one, suspends it, introduces another, *ad infinitum* in a nexus of counterbalancing or unpredictable signifiers until the very end when the apparently disparate and muted signifiers merge into one concrete dramatised referent: the author's disapprobation of India's caste system. No doubt the impatient reader would be unable to endure this endless game of signifier deferral. However, the joy derivable at the very end approximates an orgiastic pleasure and hence, the uniqueness of this novel.

The main characters Ammu and Velutha, represent the freeborn and the untouchable respectively. However, the two, by a fortuitous stroke, fall in love with each other in spite of the fatal potentiality of the union. It is significant that Ammu hails from the Kochanma family, which despite owning the paradise pickles company which should cater for the country's basic needs, is an irrespressible Brahmin. Similarly, despite the fact that Velutha has been apparently accepted into the Kochanma family and adored by Rahel and Esthappen - Ammu's children - perhaps because of his respectable genius at repairing household wares, he is eventually ostracised by the family and beaten to death by the police, on the bidding of the Kochanmas, for making love to Ammu. Here, Roy rubs in the message: a natural emotion of love is damned by the invocation of a wicked and segregationist law by dyed-in-the wool traditionalists. The author makes Esthappen and Rahel - symbols of the younger generation - witness to good effect, Velutha's brutalisation by the police for loving their mother, who had been deserted by a freeborn husband. The narrator's words are full of sarcasm and loathing for the whole caste system at this point:

> What Esthappen and Rahel witnessed that
> morning, though they didn't know it then,
> was a clinical demonstration in controlled
> conditions (this was not war afterall, or genocide
> of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy.
> Structure, Order, Complete monopoly.
> It was human history masquerading as God's
> purpose, revealing herself to an underage audience. P309.

Is it therefore any wonder that when



Alexandrie, 1992.
© Anne Favret & Patrick Manez

Rahel - Ammu's daughter - wants to marry she 'drifts into (it) like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge?' (p.18). Apparently, the adults have eaten sour grapes and now the children's teeth are on edge.

However, the point of emphasis is the uniqueness of Roy's narrative, which, as we have stated earlier, reaches its climax by dispensing with predictable parameters. This mode is aesthetically fulfilling: the author dexterously handles the different strands of the tale until they all culminate in the signified which bears the ultimate message: the murder of Velutha by the police for making love to a freeborn. In this narrative, episodes like the death of Ammu which should traditionally and chronologically come after the death of Velutha come much earlier in the narrative, in chapter seven (Wisdom Exercise Notebooks). In the same vein, as early as the first chapter the marriage of Ammu's daughter Rahel and the death of Sophie Mol are already intimated even before Ammu's own marriage is broached. This is analogous to Toni Morrison's style in Beloved, a style describable as the tale in a circle. In the hands of Roy, these snippets of tenebrous signifiers are tied together at the end of the novel just as Morrison's Beloved resolves numerous plot detours.

It bears remarking that the aesthetics of *The God of Small Things* is not extrinsic but intrinsic in the sense that the author, albeit in the language of indirectness, weaves good art into this novel in the story of the Kathakali man in chapter twelve (Kochu Thomban). A juxtaposition of the style in the story told by the Kathakali man and in the overall craft of the book reveals some deliberate coincidence between the two. Hence, by metaphoric extension, the Kathakali man who, in telling stories, can 'punish it, send it up like a bubble... wrestle it to the ground and let it go again... (who) can stop for hours to examine a wilting leaf' (pp.229/230) is Arundhati Roy wrestling with the labyrinthine tale of *The God of Small Things*.

Karen King-Aribisala also reinvents the tale, but differently, in *Kicking Tongues*. She on her own part levels out the grey areas existing between prose and poetry and thereby brings about a striking coalescence of the two genres. In doing so, she re-affirms the tenuousness of the differences between literary genres in general and between poetic prose in particular. For her, it seems, the compartmentalisation of literature into genres is bound to circumscribe the diverse resonance of the subject itself and hence, has inaugurated an uncanny but enriching unity between the traditionally polarised genres.

However, the mutual existence of prose and poetry in *Kicking Tongues* is not merely designed to achieve aesthetic effect but to reflect the troublous activity of what she describes as the kicking tongue. A tongue kicks in a moment of fury or rage and so its activity cannot but be ambivalent: kicking against the truth or kicking against lies. King-Aribisala carefully privileges the latter function of the tongue over the former. Hence, the narrator in the Epilogue regales us with:

The Lord
Hath done
Great things
For them
For us
He has done great things
Blessed us
Blessed
As we are

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With tongues
Which
Kick
The truth
TONGUES
RISING
UP
AND
KICKING DOWN
PERVERSITIES (pp.241/242)

With the above graphological permutation, the author encentres the action of the tongue which kicks against lies and roots for truth rather than that which privileges lies over truth. The consequence of the preference of lies is often grave: a free and fair election on June 12 1993 in Nigeria won by businessman politician Moshood Abiola was truncated, she says, by lying tongues kicking against truth.

From the outset of the novel in 'the journey to Abuja', the tongues have begun to kick, broaching diverse issues of importance to both Nigeria and humanity in general. Significantly also, the novel ends with the kicking tongue, a factor which underscores the text's constitutive unity.

Kicking Tongues basically thematises the necessity for peace and unity in the world. In this regard, the author debunks all war-inducing cleavages, preoccupied as she is with integrating opposites. This is a recurring theme in the novel which is underscored by the pastor through the black lady who says, 'Race is just another barrier in life to prevent us from doing good, and which people use to separate us from the love of God.' (p.221). This is the point at which *Kicking Tongues* intersects with Roy's *The God of Small Things*, a pointer to the fact that artists, in keeping with the postulate of Carl Jung, draw on the same primordial pool called the 'Collective Unconscious' in their creative activity.

However, it bears underlining that King-Aribisala is averse to polarities that are capable of unsettling society and sowing discord among people. This motif becomes evident with an admirable tour de force in phase three (The Postgraduate English Major: This literature life). Here, the postgraduate student who is easily the persona of the author is preoccupied with synthesising opposites and thus, is not averse to simultaneously reading Milton and eating Stilton, discussing European and African literature without making short shrift of either. This calls back memories from William Blake who enthused in his poem 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' that opposition is true friendship.

Yet, one looking for a well-developed plot and characterisation in the conventional sense would be disappointed with this work, for the novel lacks a chronologically developed theme. Each of the seven phases of the novel tells varied stories which nonetheless are linked by a resonant motif, albeit subtly delineated. Some of the stories are replete with scathing criticism and others mild. But in all of them, Nigeria is the big bus (comprising both the macro/central bus conveying seekers of truth to Abuja and the micro/sub one in phase four 'Bus Play', (p. 159) which re-enacts the typical hilarious experience on a ride in a Lagos 'Molue' or 'Kombi' bus. It is against this backdrop that the author unfolds the kaleidoscopic episode of the stories.

Roy and King-Aribisala have beefed up the scaffolding of story-telling by re-inventing them differently. They (both) have built on the unpredictable and subtle vein of pristine tale by telling tales characterised by seemingly digressive and unwieldy plots.

This is part of the staple features of stories told in the former colonies. Meaning was never deduced by word-for-word correspondence but the accretion of the tales. The meaning of a tale was often unraveled through song, puns and in fact, the techniques of the story within a story. Arundhati Roy and Karen King-Aribisala have simply exhumed this rich medley to enrich the contemporary novel.

Otu is a member of the Editorial Board of the Nigerian Guardian

A cultural economy of the book in Africa

BY ODIA OFEIMUN

James Gibbs, Jack Mapanje (eds) THE AFRICAN WRITERS HANDBOOK, African Books Collective (with the Dag HammarskJold Foundation) Oxford & Uppsala, 1999, 432pp

AFRICAN literature and publishing, especially in the last quarter of the 20th Century, appeared to be governed by a vicious circle: the more the writers' conferences, bookfairs, publishers' get-togethers and book foundations organised, the more the problems of the

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