
Reinvented Memoir in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT: Arundhati Roy's "*The God of Small Things*" is a major breakthrough in the Indian fiction in English to reveal the unjust universe. In the last decade of twentieth century Arundhati Roy is one of the remarkable writers in the Indian sub-continent who has come out with her works which are fired by the realization that tradition could but prove a dubious heritage for the oppressed mass of women. This paper tries to bring out fiercely reinvented memoir, an effort to escape from the traumatic memory of some past experience that has remained too vivid and haunting for her to forget, a novel written to overcome the anguish of a persistent memory by desperately facing it and blurring it out, and a fixation with an event that had happened long ago in the past. Roy exposes the ugliness of the society by bringing two children to react to it, since children are as yet uncorrupted and unwrapped by rigid social attitudes and can bring their unhampered response, however, pained to an issue or an event. The pain of these two children serves as a powerful plea for rejection of this system. This paper is an attempt to inform and lead into new places the flow of sympathetic consciousness.

Index Terms: *Memoir, Anguish, Consciousness, Social attitudes*

"Art property so called is no recreation, it can't be learned at spare moments, nor pursued when we have nothing better to do. It is no handiwork for drawing room tables, no relief of the ennui of boudoirs; it must be understood and taken seriously or not at all." (1)

Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize winning novelist is known to all not only for her new and original style but also for her social consciousness. Her book *The God of Small Things* (1997) which became instantly known in the world of literature, deals with, apart from many other things, pain and suffering of the individual in a setting of all round cruelty unchecked and unstoppable, since the constraints fail so often that they may as well not exist. The novel deals with cruelty that spills out of established institutions of society like family and marriage, machinery for keeping law and enforcing justice, and the complicated system determining gender inequality in society. The injustice that the untouchables have to suffer, the insults and abuses women in society have to bear and the trials and tribulations, the defenseless have to undergo under brutalized machinery in a caste-ridden and hierarchical society, all of these become the subject matter of Arundhati Roy's book. Her other books *The End of Imagination*(1998) and *The Greater Common Good*(1999), bring out, respectively, the author's apocalyptic vision of the nuclear armed India and the world and her rage against the authorities who uproot men and women from their homes to build big dams in the country.

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is full of autobiographical elements. It is set in a village in the state of Kerala. Roy herself grew up in Kerala's Syrian Christian community. She says: "Kerala is home to four of the world's great religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Marxism." (2) Her categorizing Marxism as a religion throws a significant light on the working of Marxism in Kerala. For many years, during spells Kerala has had a Marxist-led government, though the party operates through a system of elections and democracy there. Arundhati Roy was born in Shilong, where her father was employed as a tea-planter; her early childhood was spent at village, Ayemenem, a few kilometers from Kottayam town in central Kerala. The plot of the novel also unfolds with Ayemenem as its locale. Just after a few years of her birth, her father, the tea-planter divorced his wife, and her mother brought her and her brother to Ayemenem. Her mother Mary Roy had broken the family tradition by marrying a Bengali and then divorcing him. She also made history by fighting the provisions of the Christian Succession Act and in this connection; she even went to the Supreme

Court. The favourable ruling allowed Christian women an equal share with their male siblings, in their father's property.

Roy was thus the product of a broken home as are her characters, Estha and Rahel, in her book. The Ayemenem house was dominated by the traditional patriarchal norms. The men in and around the house were conservative in their outlook. It is this orthodoxy of belief concerning the place of women, their rights and the personal freedom enjoyed by them that provides Arundhati the subject for her novel *The God of Small Things*. According to the testimony of her mother young Arundhati was a voracious reader of book and "most of the time she educated herself." (3) Arundhati herself says about her book that:

"Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it. It is located very close to me. It is located in the village I grew up in. It is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest ones and to see how they fit together." (4)

The novel *The God of Small Things* tells the story of a woman, Ammu divorced by her husband and neglected by her family. Ammu is the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi and sister of Chacko. She had a traumatized childhood having seen how her father used to beat her mother and being beaten herself in habitual working out of sadistic fits of rage. She was deprived of higher education because her father thought that girls should not have it. Pappachi, her father was outwardly a model citizen. Though servile and fawning in his dealing with white men, he otherwise carried himself with dignity and had a good reputation in his work. At home, however, he was very different, being a cruel tyrant to his wife and children. Home for Ammu was no less than a prison and it was mostly because of her need to escape from it that she entered matrimony in a hurry. It was not an arranged marriage, as was the custom, but her own decision. Ammu married, out of her community, a Bengali young man working as Assistant Manager in a Tea Plantation in the north. She discovered after marriage that he was a feckless alcoholic who, to save himself from being dismissed, was willing to accept the indecent proposal of his boss Mr. Hollick. Aghast, she left him with her twins Rahel and Estha. Ayemenem, her parent's house, did not receive her with any warmth. She returned to "everything she had fled from only a few years ago". (5) (*The God of Small Things*, p. 42) and her father did not believe her story "because he didn't believe that an Englishmen, any Englishmen, would covet another man's wife." (*The God of Small Things*, p. 42) Her brother Chacko went to Oxford while she was deprived of higher education even in India. Chacko married abroad, had a divorce and came back. The child of that marriage, Sophie was left in her mother's care in England. His belief in his sole ownership of his parents' property is suggested quite early in the novel by his habit of claiming everything as his own. He would joke: "What is yours is mine and what is mine is also mine." (*The God of Small Things*, p. 57) In Ayemenem the life of Ammu came to a standstill. She was lonely and restless living in a drab and unfriendly environment. As a married woman, and a divorcee she had no position in parents' home. A divorced daughter has no position anywhere, the novel insists on making this point, especially after she had married outside her community and broken faith. Arundhati Roy describes Ammu in her parents' house as a woman, a divorcee, mother of two, with her body surprisingly young and a strange, untamed spirit of wildness about her seen occasionally in her behaviour:

"On days like this, there was something restless and untamed about her. As though, she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcee hood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her eyes. She spoke it to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims." (*The God of Small Things*, p.44) She comes in contact with Velutha, an untouchable and a talented craftsman who had a rebellious spirit that made Vellaya, his father, uneasy; "Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation, an unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked, the way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel. While these were qualities that were perfectly acceptable in Touchables, Vellaya Paapen thought that in a Parvaan they could (and would, and indeed, should) be constructed as insolence." (*The God of Small Things*, p. 76) An illicit relationship develops between the spirited Paravan Velutha and the divorcee Ammu. But when it was discovered Ammu was locked in a room and Velutha was arrested and mercilessly beaten, beaten so badly that he died a few after that. No help came for Velutha because he was an untouchable, a Paravan. Even the Marxists who made political capital out of his death let him fall into the

hands of the police. The police were merciless mostly because, as the novel insists, he was a Paravan, an untouchable who got into an illicit relationship with a superior Syrian Christian woman. The police Inspector was equally brutal with Ammu and called her a “*Veshya*” and her children “*illegitimate*.” (The God of Small Things, p. 8) Velutha died of the fractured skull, fractured ribs and the ruptured intestines. Rahel, Ammu’s daughter as she grows up and understands everything develops a sense of isolation, suffocation and frigidity. She is aggressive and silently protests against the dogmas. She chooses what is considered low and detestable. Rahel is a child of a broken home and a mother who was tarnished. Her mother Ammu, had died at the age of thirty one. Rahel had seen her mother’s suffering and humiliation. She, as well as her brother, had seen, and been an unwitting party to the betrayal of Velutha. So these nightmarish experiences haunted her like a ghost. Her mother’s death brought loss of her last moorings. Her brother Estha, was subjected to child abuse while on a visit to a movie. This traumatic experience sinks deep into the psyche of the seven year child and haunts him throughout his life. At the beginning of the novel we see Rahel coming to Ayemenem to be with her brother Estha who has given up speech altogether. Estha and Rahel know that they were instrumental in the betrayal of Velutha whom they loved dearly. Baby Kochamma had forced them to make a certain statement before the Inspector. Baby Kochamma acts as the villain because her own life had remained unfulfilled. She loved a Jesuit priest whom she met as a young woman. She even converted to Roman Catholic faith and became a nun in order to be near him. But soon she returned to her father since there was no chance to be near the priest she loved. Frustration made her stubborn. Baby Kochamma becomes the instrument of destruction of Ammu and Velutha, because all her impulses make her seek and generate unhappiness rather than love and kindness.

A telling metaphor used by Arundhati Roy is that of the lantern and the tallow stick. ‘There are big dreams and little ones. “Big Man, the Laltain sahib, the Small Man the Mombatti”, an old Bihari coolie, who met Estha’s school excursion party at the railway station... used to say of dreams’. (The God of Small Things, p. 89) Roy suggests that the dreams of the weak are the ones most surely to be crushed. The book shows maladjustment between two different gods – of the rich and of the poor. Mombatti the tallow stick has no glass, no protection, and no support and so is easily blown out by the surge of the wind. The two unprotected ones in the novel are Velutha and Ammu and have to forsake the big things and indulge in small things. “They knew that there was nowhere to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things.” (The God of Small Things, p. 338)

The novel suggests that the cruel treatment meted out to the untouchable is but an extension of inherent cruelty in society which is visible in its treatment of women and other defenceless persons. In the novel we get to know that Velutha’s grandfather Kelan had embraced Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability. He later found that he had committed a blunder as such converts were given separate churches and priests and not permitted to mix with other superior Christians.

In Ayemenem House Mammachi remembers that there was a time when a Paravan had to wipe his footsteps with a broom lest a high-caste person should be polluted by putting his foot on it. It is only a special concession that Velutha, who was still a Paravan although his grandfather had converted to Christianity is allowed to enter the house, though only through the back door. Velutha’s natural high spirits make him, more than anyone else, vulnerable to punishment. As a small boy when he visited Ayemenem house with his father to deliver the plucked coconut, they entered from the back entrance. As a young man he is treated suspiciously by Comrade Pillai the Communist Party boss in the town who does not like him for his caste and independent nature. As a mature man, he is falsely implicated in a case of attempted rape of Ammu and is dragged, beaten and killed. Arundhati Roy portrays the miserable condition of the Paravans. She shows how Pappachi and Mammachi treat them:

“Pappachi would not allow Paravans in to the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that the Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi told Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping in to Paravans footprints. In Mammachi’s time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas.

They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.” (The God of Small Things, pp. 73-74)

Those who converted to Christianity were called Rice-Christians because they were given some food and rice by the British. The dawn of Independence improved their condition, though being Christians; they were not entitled to job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates. As for Velutha, Mammachi takes pity on him and asks his father to send him to the untouchable’s schools and later employs him as a skilled carpenter in her factory. She is also convinced that Velutha has the skills of an engineer who can mend radios, clocks and water pumps. By nature Velutha is bold, fearless and adventurous. In contrast, his father is humble and servile as he is ‘an old world Paravan’. He cannot allow or even tolerate that his son-a Paravan- should be a lover of Ammu, the daughter of his benefactress and high caste people who live in the big house. He runs to inform Mammachi of the liaison himself. He reveals all to Mammachi. He asks God’s forgiveness for “having spawned a monster”. He offers to “kill his son with his own bare hands”. (The God of Small Things, p. 256)

The love of Ammu and Velutha throws away scruples of caste, creed and community. Ammu dreams of the cheerful man with one arm who “Leaves no footprint in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors” (The God of Small Things, p. 216) Velutha is also the physical incarnation of ammu’s dream of “the cheerful one-armed man with salty skin.” He is called the “God of Loss” and “the God of Small Things”. He is the god of small things because of his and Ammu’s utter lack of strength and defence. Their lack of hope and lack of future is symbolized as the god of small things. Arundhati Roy successfully evokes the image of such man who leaves no footprint in her novel and the image grows insistent as the novel progresses.

The God of Small Things deals with the victimization of the marginalized in a unique way. Not all the victims are parts of the same social class, caste or group. Ammu is a woman but not an untouchable or economically weak. The same is true of Mammachi, Velutha is male in the patriarchal system and hence above the female but he is an untouchable and belongs to the economically weaker section of the society. Chacko is an upper caste, upper class male a self-declared Marxist but in fact only an ineffective romantic. All these levels of oppression and victimization operated simultaneously and continually. The theme of victimization is the binding factor which makes *The God of Small Things* a unified work of art and an artistic achievement.

For those who seek permanence of the unjust social structure love between dissimilar opposites is most potent and unexpected enemy. In Arundhati Roy’s novel the relationship that shines above all sorrows and betrayals is that of Ammu and Velutha. This relationship becomes revolutionary in its intensity and in its fragility. The oppressiveness that accompanied Ammu’s life both as a child and as a young girl has been brought out by the novel. Her act of entering into a relationship with Velutha actually becomes her first action that gives her fulfillment. It is a relationship of her choice. Her marriage was a considered choice made by her but a blind stumbling into an alley that seemed to open before her. Her relationship with Velutha is spontaneous. Their victimhood is their bond. It is their joint rebellion, a gesture of heedless courage, an assertion of their urgent needs, their momentary triumph before inevitable defeat.

The God of Small Things stands out for its concern for the weak, the small, the innocent, and the powerless. The centuries old inhuman caste regulations, balance of power in the family loaded against the female and finally giving in to the attraction of negative hatred are the issues that dominate the novel. Ammu and her lover could be truly called: “Comrades in arms in a losing battle against the forces of oppression.”(6)

END NOTES AND REFERENCES

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