

Voices in the Backyard : A Peep into The God of Small Things

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Abstract:- Nobody is at home. This is the quintessential, as it casts its shadowy mould on my fribbling grey and red, theme omniruling through the pages of contemporary Indian literature in English. I'm not comfortable, to confess, with the word 'theme'; I would rather call it 'something', because 'something' has possibility of 'everything' and an aura of 'nothing'. And, this is what lurks from the jungle of words spread over (in)different 'pageal' territories. From loss of inheritance in Kiran Desai to Upamano Chatterjee's Augusts (English, though) through difficult daughters of Manju Kapur and Anita Desai's turmoil in custody, we can feel someone, at least, heaving one's heart out to ingress few drops of familial elixir. But, alas!

From the general to the specific, I wish to eavedrop into the family of The God of The Small Things. Nobody seems home, here too. Though there's this family, a big family; but, everybody's a loner, a prisoner, a sufferer, a victim. I wouldn't dare touch upon their soul 'like an invidious doctor'; rather, I would sit 'silently' with Rahel for sometime along the river bank or would go for a very long 'unending' walk with her into the winding Ayemenem roads; or, would try to listen into Amu Ipe's whispers, the cacophony of her heart's desire. The God of Small Things may have grand themes and schemes, but to me it presents a family in search of family... loneliness in search of comforts of a roof...a hand in the need of a hand...and, many hearts in search of their symphonic beats. This paper is an attempt to peep into Arundhati Roy's characters' topsy-turvied world to seek colour for a family painting which has all, almost, colours that make a painting a painting, if not a family.

“...the secret of the great stories is that they have no secrets.

The great stories are the ones you have heard and want to

hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit

comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick(y)

endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are

as the house you live in. **The house! The house you live in?**

Whose house these great stories talk about then? Aren't

**all great stories about ‘house to home’ and ‘home to house’ quest?
Aren’t all great stories about the walls ‘houses’ have,
and should not have;
aren’t they about a few more windows that open out
to the sky which has clouds morphing into
our favourite pictures;
and aren’t they
about a few less doors with recognizable knockings?”**

I shall not ask for a referendum whether The God Of Small Things is a great story or not, but I shall begin with presuming that it is a story that has tickled a few bones for good. In the quotation above mentioned, I have put a few lines in bold. These lines are, as an addendum, to the original quote of Ms Arundhati Roy reflection of my take of the story in question. Contemporary Indian literature is rife with the quest of an individual into the wilderness of his own making. The contemporary protagonists, or else, have a chasm too wide to fill. Agastya of Upamanu Chatterjee’s English August is a ‘lost and found’ man, not unlike his peers on the pages elsewhere. He has a world, he considers his very own and of his own belonging. A world he has been in and integrated himself in. He has to move out...not his call; and, his own world is not the world he has longed deep within to belong to. He doesn’t belong! He is startled to discover himself and is home away from the home he ‘homed’ for so long! Manju Kapur’s Ida sets herself out to find her mother Veermati’s solace. What compels her out is not the face she’s known as mother since long, but what lies within. There lies the quest of a young restless soul’s endeavour into an uncharted territory. The quest may seem to be into the realm of Veermati, but to me she seems to be looking for a door to the home where she could have had the walls painted with the colours of

her choice and with windows wide open where she could have breathed herself in! Kiran Desai’s loss is even more appalling. Her Biju is always on the run to belong to somewhere. He is in an eternal quest for a future which may guarantee him a roof, bread and may give him his identity. Sai is naively busy making sense of the nonsense she has been put into. Jemubhai Patel, the judge, is frustratingly indulged in weaving a halo around him that is too touchy to stand the dust and the smoke it ought to have been made up of. Even the small hill town of Kalimpong seem to be bustling with what it was, what it is and what it will be...what Kalimpong stand for? I have mentioned these snippets from the pages which have been making sound and fury in the literary circles for quite a time; and can be termed the representative contemporary Indian literary hue. These colours in the background will help ‘the gods’ in the following lines find their groove.

“Ammu said that human beings were creatures of habit, and it was

amazing the kind of things one could get used to”.

Let me begin with Ammu, one of the characters who roam over the pages of The God of Small Things. Ammu Ipe is where the story is, but she is never the story she aspires to be. She does

everything which is in her stride to keep her story moving, but ends up being none, being nowhere. She leaves her abusive father for a man who proves worse; and finds herself at the door she left never to knock it again, with heavier self and two wondering twin-kids. Life has, surely, put wisdom on her tongue, but has not spared her the wisdom to sail through it. In those dark corners where she would find herself often at loggerheads with the dark, her philosophical uttering may serve her listeners a sparkle about her, but that seldom comes to her rescue when the dear life comes knocking down at her. She tries many a door, picks many a hand, stirs many an eye, but dies homeless. Her heart lumps around to be lumped eventually! She is the creature of hard earned habits who amazingly got used to the kind of things she could have despised if given the slightest rope.

Then, we have Navomi Ipe aka Baby Kochamma. Once a petite, naïve and lovely girl, Baby Kochamma's tryst with her fate is no better than Ammu. Unrequited love for someone who couldn't respond in kind, leaves a once naïve girl to deal with a swollen heart and a weighty, literally, body. If not her destination, then nobody must be destined becomes the solace of her aggrieved soul. The bitterness knows no limits in her case. An antagonist to anything good, Baby Kochamma is no less sufferer. Her heart hasn't known love ever, and she never have been home since she left it for the convent. So she wouldn't let any heart feel love or get love; she wouldn't let anybody be home, if there is anything like that.

"She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes.

She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the river bank. She smoked

Cigarettes and had midnight swims..."

Rahel, the 'she' of the twins, is the narrator of the in parts and pockets. She often wears red tinted plastic sunglasses with yellow rims. Weird, no? She comes across weird because she has been brought weird. An intelligent and straightforward person, she is never comfortable. Impulsive and wild because more of circumstances than inherent nature, she has 'emptiness'. Being close to her mother, she has seen more than she could have made sense of. That leaves her bewildered and empty. Across the pages, she seems, silently, to piece together a home that was not to be. Witness to all the tantrums thrown around in the novel, she infests herself with the inevitable. She carries herself with élan at instances, but the groom that has grooved itself in her depths never let her come out light. Rahel trots, like everybody else in the novel, many a street to figure out the right plaque for her home; she lets her heart venture into the dark to bring out some light that may have enlightened her journey through the darker patches she has earned for herself, but to no hope. After having through the forest she was put into and later she herself decides to delve in, she is back to where she thinks she belongs...to Ayemenem. Like Ammu, she has wisdom on her tongue, but that doesn't seem to percolate any deeper. Life has its scars audible in her cadence. Rahel desperately longs to be home, since she has seen Ammu's desperation and frustration from very close distance, she's felt Ammu's yearning for a safe, cozy, accommodative place like no one else. **She is silent and empty because she has lived through the silence and emptiness. Rahel shadows the novelist herself and will never be home because the novelist seems to know no home. Because the home is not the place one wants to be at, it is where one wants to be in...ensconced.**

Esthappen Yako aka Estha is a serious, intelligent, and somehow nervous child who wears beige and pointy shoes and has an Elvis

puff. He is more practical and responsible, as per baby Kochamma's estimation. Brother to Rahel, he is the first sufferer and the second fiddle in the narration. He has had his share of experiences. He walks really really long walks, and washes cloths with utter abandon. When he walks those long long walks, he can be heard crying. When he is in his abandon-adventure, he can be seen washing something off himself. We can feel something clung to his feet that he tries, in vain, to put away at some far off place from where it doesn't come back to haunt him. The things which have woven themselves into his skin never let him sit, and the walks never let him home. **He is the heaviest; he has the weight of let up emotions, he has the burden of the seen and the experienced. He is the one who seeks the home the most, since he has been closer and longer around.** He trudges along the passages and the pages in the novel in the hope of being somewhere he belongs. Does he belong somewhere; does anyone in the novel belong anywhere?

Velutha has his own wanderings. A skilled man of northward mobility, Velutha the untouchable Dalit touches every important soul in the novel, and manages to touch Ammu quite deeper." (The way) her body existed only where he touched her. The rest of her was smoke. He folded his fear into a perfect rose. He held it out in the palm of his hand. She took it from him and put it in her hair". Velutha died following what he felt was her right place. **He set himself out on a journey that he thought was to the home; was to a place he assured himself was**

of his reckoning; was to his eventual belonging. His was the journey from nowhere to somewhere to nowhere. He suffered because he aspired to be home.

We have Chacko, Margaret, Mammacha, Pappacha, the poor Sophia, all wandering towards Ayemenem wondering all through where do they really belong. The prime mover in the novel is a static place Ayemenem that has set so many lives in motion. The place is the home every one so desperately seeks, but the place seeks no one. The beaten-down Ammu, the bitter Baby Kochamma, the silent Rahel, the walking Estha, the mobile Velutha, the abusive Pappacha, the ascerbic Mammacha, they all are empty because they seem to shout for, they seem to beg for, they seem to scout for, they seem to cry for something that can fill the void life has left them with. **Home is not a place with a few windows and few doors, they seek. They strut along the pages yearning for the space they can call their own; where they can spread their heart out; where they can breathe themselves; where they can belong to themselves; where they can be what they wish to be; where they are taken as what they are, and taken quite well!**

In The God of Small Things, nobody is at home...home is a loner...and, everyone is alone.

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