



Cultural Decracination in the Novel ‘The God of Small Things’ By Arundhati Roy

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy is one of the few Indian English writers actively interested in contemporary social – political issues which is amply evidenced in a number of articles, interviews and books she wrote on various topics in recent years. Mrs. Roy has authored such thought provoking works as “Confronting Empire”, “The Algebra of Infinite Justice” (2002). An internationally acclaimed essay calling upon the world not to use violence against innocent people in Afghanistan, and “War is Peace” (2002), another powerful essay. Her books like. “The Threat of Nuclear Weapons”. ‘The promotion of Equal Rights’.

KEYWORDS:

Novel, Arundhati, God of Small Things

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy draws special attention to the fact that a family which swears by male supremacy and which entrenches its familial code in the past is bound to come woe sooner or later. The sacred façade of marriage either lacks harmony or comes crumbling down in such an imbalanced familial set-up. In Arundhati Roy’s fictional world, man and woman



remain only islands and fail to shape up as continents, because their relationship lacks mutual love, understanding and adjustment. Pappachi – Mammachi relationship is ridden with jealousy, violence and hatred. Neither the external appearance of the “beautiful...Unusual, regal” (Roy 166).

Mammachi nor her talent as a successful business woman succeed in ensnaring Pappachi. On the contrary her flourishing business and growing popularity intensify his Jealousy and desire for vengeance. The edifice of their marriage survives, but its spirit crumbles totally when Pappachi, warned against beating, withdraws all communication with his wife.

The novel has some autobiographical traits Arundhati Roy seems to identify with Rahel who like the author is an architect by profession Ammu and her tragic travails are fictional adaptation of the various kinds of social ostracism that Arundhati Roy’s mother had to suffer due to her rebellious outlook. She too, like Ammu was separated from her husband. The resemblances between *The God of Small Things* and its author’s life are obvious and all pervading and have only too often been pointed out in popular articles. But fictionalizing “real” life-which is history exercise; the pain and lays the ghosts of the past; in the artistically successful work, the novelist at once recovers the past and is released from it. It would be doing *The God Small Things* an injustice, therefore, to read it only as an account of Roy’s childhood and her relationship with her famous mother and not - so - famous brother, as “a unique conflation of history and discourse, of veritable fact and aesthetic fabulation”, the autobiographical novel enables its author “to reassess his or her past and to reinterpret a plethora of racial, sexual, and cultural codes inscribed on personal consciousness ... transforming experience fictive fabulation, the author can reinscribe an



alienated and marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text” (Henke 210-211). This is one of Roy’s most striking achievements in *The God of Small Things*: They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how.

The above quotation points to the central theme in *The God of Small Things*- the theme of broken laws. Roy is not only critiquing the deep-rooted caste system in India, but the entire patriarchal structure and its concomitant devaluing of women. The novel has been aptly described as “one of our protest novels, radical and subversive and attacks several holy cows. In its taboo- breaking too, it goes farther than what has been attempted” (Lahiri 112). *The God of Small Things* centres around the relationship between Ammu, a Syrian Christian young woman divorced from a drunken, Bengali Hindu, and Velutha, an untouchable, paravan carpenter. The doyen of English literary studies in India, C.D. Narasimhaiah, is symptomatic of the deeply entrenched caste and gender prejudices that still exist in our society.

The impact of the caste system can be felt even among the Christian community in India which is indicative of the fact that the dogma of equality of this religion has not been able to dissolve it. Christians in India have internalized the idea of caste ranks even though they live and operate in a largely Christian universe. Moreover, as far as caste at the lived *Public power in the Age of Empire* (2004). In her major address to the 99th annual meeting the American Sociological Association on August 16, 2004, Arundhati Roy brilliantly examines the limits to democracy in the world today. Roy clarifies the political and human stakes of “regime Change” and reaffirms the importance of activism and protest she also



discusses the need for social movements to contest the occupation of Iraq and the reduction of “democracy” to elections with no meaningful alternatives allowed.

She explores the dangers of the “NGO-ization of resistance”, shows how governments that block non violent dissent in fact encourage terrorism and examines the role of the corporate media in marginalizing oppositional voices.

‘The Narmada Dam Project’. *The War on Terrorism* and *‘The Cost of Living’* (1999) have created great stir and put her in a storm of controversies that has only increased her stature as an intellectual. Among her other notable essays are *‘The End of Imagination’* (1998) *‘On India’s Nuclear Bomb’* and *‘The greater common Good’* (1999) Her recent *‘Power Politics’* (2002) which has been acclaimed Internationally, challenges the idea that only experts can speak out on such “Urgent matters as nuclear war; the privatization of India’s power supply by Enron and the construction of monumental dams in the country which will dislocate millions of people”. She has also written *War Talk* (2003), *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* (2004), *The Check book and The Cruise Missile* (2004), *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (2004), *The Shape of the Beast* (2008), and *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009).

Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born on 24th November, 1961. Her mother, Mary Roy, A Christian from Kerala, had been married to a Hindu tea planter and they had two children, Arundhati and her elder brother, Lalit. Arundhati Roy was born in Assam, Bengal, but following their mother’s divorce and return to Ayemenem, the children had little contact with their father. Roy states she has seen her father only a couple of times and that she does not wish to discuss him. She attended the school only at the age of seven in her mother’s



informal school named Corpus Christi where learning was not a painful process sanctioned by exams, but rather a game, so to speak. The fiction of writers like James Joyce and Gabriel Garcia Marquez seems to have a deep impact on Roy's mind.

CULTURAL DECRACINATION IN THE NOVEL 'THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS'

The God of Small Things can undoubtedly be called the book of the decade is the much discussed *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. The Booker citation describes the novel as one written with extraordinary linguistic inventiveness. Roy reveals a child's vision of the adult world in this novel in one sense, she herself being an "unprotected child in some ways". The novel can be said to be about several other things. Those interested in politics can claim that it is a satire on politics – communist establishment, to be more specific. One can call it a protest novel which is radical, subversive and taboo – breaking. Still another way may be that it tells the story of a family. Those worried about religion can certainly give a religious tone to it. An anti-establishment dimension can also be given to the novel if one wishes to do so. The book has in it a strong position taken against the way the "Untouchables" are treated in the society.

New York Times has made the following comments on Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* which won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1981; The Literary map of India is about to be redrawn.... *Midnight's Children* sounds like a continent finding its voice, an author to welcome "to world company". Seventeen years later Arundhati Roy has brought the honour again, this time to a small state in the south of the country and, of course, to the



country at large. *The God of Small Things* depicts the socio-political milieu of Kerala during the sixties. It is all about atrocities against the small things childhood and youth, women-young and old, and the untouchable. Though at the centre-stage Roy places Velutha who is crushed to death. It can clearly be said that Roy follows the footsteps of Rushdie both in stylistic experimentation and content of the novel, which is appears, is a sure way to success. *Rushdie's Mid nights' Children* inspired and encourages the Indian novelist in English to experiment, explore and record the Indian experience in English.

The God of Small Things throws light upon hierarchical structures of power, and oppression at various levels in patriarchal societies. Arundhati Roy explores how these differences of caste, class, gender, race, function through social institutions and the way they affect human interactions and relationships. The story which encompasses three generations is seen through the stream of consciousness of Rahel who has witnessed the tragedy which over took the Ayemenem house. Several years later she returns to the house because her twin-brother Estha is Re-returned'. She relieves mentally the events of her childhood. Various happenings- historical, social, and political have meshed together to create one tragedy. The victimization of the weak has been common-place in human history. All patriarchal societies see women as secondary human. However, caste and class differentials generate hierarchies among women. Untouchables or Dalits women are the most deprived of all.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a polysemic novel which can be interpreted at several levels. It may be said that the novel is a satire on politics attacking specifically the Communist establishment. It may be treated as a family saga narrating the story of four



generations of a Christian family. It may also be treated as a novel having religious overtones: One may also call it a protest novel which is subversive and taboo breaking.

It may also be treated as a love story with a tragic end. The novel gives good dividends if studied from the viewpoint of childhood experience. In terms of stylistic experimentation, it is the boldest novel of the Nineties as *The Midnight's Children* was of the Eighties.

The God of Small Things throws light upon hierarchical structures of power, and oppression at various levels in patriarchal societies. Arundhati Roy explores how these differences of caste, class, gender, race, function through social institutions and the way they affect human interactions and relationships. The novel really created a stir when it first appeared and when it specially fetched the prestigious Booker Prize for literature.

The theme of the novel, indeed, touched the hearts of all critics across the world while its language annoyed their concept of standards. However, like Mulk Raj Anand in his *Untouchable*, Arundhati Roy's fresh perspectives on an age-old tradition created waves as rebellion against the social injustice meted out both to the downtrodden and to the women. In this way, Roy using her lively original language, sensitive poetic style, deep feelings, shocking emotions and a novel approach, has really achieved a mark of eminence in helping us to overcome 'man's inhumanity to man'.

The God of Small Things enacts the external drama of confrontation between the powerful and the powerless. The author has desisted from making a woman's powerlessness as the central crisis. Both, men and women are projected as a victim or a tyrant. It must be admitted that a women's loss of power is treated very sympathetically, and yet, there is no



obsession with women's ineffectual condition in society. The psychological, economic and social problems that play a major role in the novel, devastate men and woman alike.

It is a modern novel in its theme and the treatment of the theme, a post modern novel in its knotting and knitting of narrative threads, manipulation of expressive literary forms and creative 'play' with words, a feminist novel in the pity and terror that it evokes for the condition of women in a particular cultural milieu, a political novel in its criticism of the hypocrisy of the communist party, an autobiographical novel in the way the facts of the author's life have been distilled into a verbal artifact and so on. In fact the novel is eminently amenable to multiple approaches and interpretations.

DISCUSSION

In *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy attempts to sensitize the male chauvinist and extremely traditional society to the cruelty of its treatment of women and low caste people and register her protest against its dehumanizing taboos which thwart individual's dreams, longings and claims for justice and respectability. She brings a freshness of imagination and linguistic inventiveness to bear on a long-abiding social ill which our social reformers had stigmatized as the greatest blot on Indian culture, and centuries of exploitation and suffering that have been the lot of Indian women and untouchables.

The God of Small Things is the story of lives caught in the web of social relationships and the compulsions of history. The Ipes of Ayemenem are a large family of caste Christians who in the criss-cross of their public and private interactions, reveal on the one hand, the dynamics of the political and patriarchal, the economic and religious hierarchies of power



that constitute society, and on the other, the defined, delimited roles of the individuals that constitute these hierarchies. The architectonic tension in the novel builds along the interface between these two, showing up in the process, antagonisms inherent in the very constitution of the two forces. The one cannot exist without the other, yet the two are incompatible to a large extent.

The God of Small Things deals with most of the mentioned themes along with the most elemental of human emotions, i.e., love. It is true, the story of love is never complete; recounted many times, it has never been told to the end because it has been, as Herman Melville says, “the endless flowing river in the cave of man”. Arundhati Roy links her narrative of the destinies of small things and their small gods caught in ‘a hopelessly practical world’ (34) to the all-time epic stories that theme this conflict between self and society and between the dispossessed individual and the empowered representatives of social hegemony. The repeated association of river and sea, symbols of the eternal flow of life, with the Ayemenem house and its inmates are significant from this point of view. All this lifts the characters above the smallness of their canvas and makes them representatives in the eternal drama of the confrontation between the individual's desire and dignity and the dominating structures of society. The business of art that of lifting the common into the uncommon, and the commonplace into the beautiful, of sculpting the mundane into the felt truth of universal experience, is thus accomplished.

Instead Roy writes with a linguistic stylistic exuberance which lends a flavour and colour, though artificial, of its own to the entire novel. She writes different to a great extent and in



doing so breaks many of the accepted rules of language. The novel abounds in single word sentences, and paragraphs, mis-spellings, verbless sentences, capital at will etc.

Ideas come to Arundhati Roy like insects in the rains. Similes jostle each other, in measureless numbers and hustle her into making them talk loudly. Metaphors issue forth from her pen like incessant nectar drops from heaven. It is a whirlpool of Similes, Metaphors repetitions, parenthesis, Idylls, Rhyme and Rhythm, Music and Dance. , Mythology and Modernity, Poverty and Riches; poetry and prose, Monologues and soliloquies, pleasure and pain, sex and sensations, Love and Hate; past, present and future. Arundhati's mind flashes forwards and backwards, jumps into the future and falls back into the past, which in fact pictures the present Heaven and Hell; Past; Present and Future all become one. Keats, in his odes, has given a Feast of colours' a Feast of sound, a Feast of Seasons- separate feasts. Arundhati out –Keats Keats and feeds us with sumptuous.

Feasts of all kinds on the same table simultaneously, like a Victorian Hostess serving different dishes but on the same platter- sweet, salty and Coconuts. It is all delicious. Roy writes in a Faulknerian style which is a combination of both a stream of consciousness novel and traditional or narrative style as it is used in *The Sound and Fury*.

By presenting two innocent children as responders to the tragedy resulting from the rigidity of petrified social mores nurtured by the patriarchal ideology of a caste-based culture that cultivates snobbery and violence to maintain social order, Arundhati Roy condemns and rejects the tyranny of this tradition for a story of her own. The anguish of the guilt stricken and grief-crazed children who are traumatized by the 'Terror' perpetuated by the adult



world serves as a powerful language of rejection of this authoritarian system that has no place in it for dissent and for self-asserting individuals.

Arundhati Roy through the means of storytelling questions the system of powers and attempts to change it through the power embodied in literature. Kate Millet has pointed out: 'when a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely a need to speak itself aloud when its working is exposed and questioned it becomes not only subjected to discussion, but even to change'. It is very interesting to note that in the text Roy has carried out covertly the emasculation of men by women and also emasculation of woman but not in the conventional derogatory sense. Her women learn to think and act independently and take on the role of protector but in the process do not sacrifice their feminine qualities.

One of the dominant socio-political concerns in Arundhati's novel is the rigid caste-structure to be seen in India. This caste-oriented rigidity sometimes plays havoc with the innumerable innocent lives. The 'bigness' of 'big things' and 'big people' should be read in their generous and compassionate understanding of 'small things' and 'small people'. Unfortunately, in the present-day Indian society, this is not to be, and the inevitable consequence is tragic and claustrophobic. The weaker sections of our society - like the paravans. The scheduled castes and the have-nots - inescapably suffer a good deal in the process of caste-stratifications.

CONCLUSION

Typical themes in Indian fiction are said to be "the caste system, social attitude, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions superiority and inferiority".



Another dominant theme that gets focus in the novel is environmental problems. E.M. Forster who is often referred to as a reluctant traditionalist has admitted “oh dear, yes – the novel tells a story”. But felt that its most fundamental aspect “could be something different – melody, or perception of the truth...” (Forster 45). What is attempted in the present novel is a truthful account of the ills of the society.

The first reference to environmental problems we get in the very first chapter of the novel. Estha used to walk “along the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils” (13). The novelist is here critical of the hands behind polluting the river and the policy of the government buying pesticides with World Bank, both of which will ultimately contribute in making the life of the people miserable.

As is well known, the patriarchal structure with its resulting class and gender hierarchy is a more or less universal phenomenon, which cuts across all nations, religions and races. However, in India, a further dimension was added to it with the origination of the caste system about 2,500 years ago. This system which is an integral part of Hinduism, divides the population into four major groups. The Brahmins, (Priestly caste) at the top, followed by the Kshatriya (warrior caste), then the Vaishya (commoners, usually known as trading and artisan castes), and at the bottom the Sudra (agricultural labourers). Some of whom are beyond the pale of caste and are known as untouchables.

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