ARUNDHATI ROY'S ART AND CRAFT IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract

Critics also see in Arundhati Roy's personal life a parallel to the story of the novel. "Like William Faulkner, Roy has forged her literary universe in *The God of Small Things* out of experience and from her own postage stamp of native soil." 4 Therefore, it is argued that Rahel and Estha are the twin brother and sister Arundhati and Lalit, Ammu is none but Mary Roy and most of the other characters have their resemblance in her large family consisting of several cousins, uncles, and aunts, and granny. However, the novel cannot be dismissed as a mere transcription of the personal. When asked about the importance of 'lived life' in writing fiction and whether there is any processing of the personal, Arundhati says, "If we didn't, it would be tragic. But I am not talking about gratuitous confession. The kind of writing I would respect is not about gratuitous individualization where each person is special, and we all wear baby T-shirts saying, I am special.

Keywords:Disarmament, Multiculturalism, Modernity, Immigrants, Emigrants, Insurgency, Racial-discrimination, Globalization.

Arundhati Roy stirred the entire English literary scene in 1997, winning the coveted Booker prize for her epoch-making debut novel *The God of Small Things*. For the novel, Roy was hailed as the new deity of prose, and the princess of prose by the critics. India Today writes about the novel after the admiration of the novel by the jury:

What the judges most admired was not its Indian setting, its slightly hackneyed reworking of the old duchess and the gamekeeper plot in the story of cross caste erotic love between a paravan and a Syrian Christen or the admittedly valuable insight, Roy offers into the complicated politics of Kerala. It was, rather, her verbal exuberance: almost alone among the 106 entries, Roy has her voice, her own signature.¹

However, it is the same jury which does not fail to appreciate the thematic and artistic depth of the novel: "The *God of Small Things* fulfills the highest demand of art of fiction: to see the world, not conventionally or habitually, but as if for the first time. Roy's achievement, and it is considerable, is never to forget about the small things in life: the insects, and flowers, wind and water, the outcasts and the despised." 2 It is, therefore, clear that *The God of Small things* is also important as a thematically powerful book. The

issues she has raised in the novel are no less important and have contributed to the growing thematic range of the Indian fiction in English. She has shown a commitment, a social vision, and anyone who fails to see it can appreciate the novel correctly. As a matter of fact, the social significance of *The God of Small Things* holds the key to several mysteries of the novel. K. V. Surendran has aptly summed up Arundhati's concerns in the novel: "The God of Small Things is about several things at the same time. It has a strong political undercurrent or rather it is a political satire at a certain level. It is also a protest novel which is radical and unconventional. The novel is a story of a family too. Religion is another point of interest. Also, an anti-establishment dimension can be attached to it if one wants to. Untouchability as a canker is dealt within the novel at some depth. To crown it all, this novel is about certain people we come across in our day-to-day life and who have their private worries and concerns." 3

Critics also see in Arundhati Roy's personal life a parallel to the story of the novel. "Like William Faulkner, Roy has forged her literary universe in *The God of Small Things* out of experience and from her own postage stamp of native soil." 4 Therefore, it is argued that Rahel and Estha are the twin brother and sister Arundhati and Lalit, Ammu is none but Mary Roy and most of the other characters have their resemblance in her large family consisting of several cousins, uncles, and aunts, and granny. However, the novel cannot be dismissed as a mere transcription of the personal. When asked

about the importance of 'lived life' in writing fiction and whether there is any processing of the personal, Arundhati says, "If we didn't, it would be tragic. But I am not talking about gratuitous confession. The kind of writing I would respect is not about gratuitous individualization where each person is special, and we all wear baby T-shirts saying, I am special. I think if you can see there isn't anybody who is really not a product of their history and culture and who is not at the focus of so many big guns that are booming — I would rather respect a writer....who can scale from the personal to the other stuff."

5

In an interview published in *India Today*, Arundhati's mother says, "...I was a woman separated from my husband. We are not divorced, though I tried to hide the pain from my children. It is only when I read her book that I realized that even at five she was conscious that we were unwelcome in the native home... In the book Arundhati lampoons almost all the people who had surrounded her at that time. Some of them might take offence. But she never meant to hurt anybody. Remember, it is a work of fiction. She had drawn the bare bones of the characters from the family. But it is not wising of me to say that I am Ammu." 6 Therefore, it is only a strategy — an objective correlative to anchor the anguish, and to move from the particular to the universal.

Arundhati Roy spent her childhood at Ayamenem (which is called Ayemenm in the novel) located a few kilometers away from Kottayam town in Kerala. She went to school at Corps Christi

(established by her mother) in Kottayam, followed by the Lawrence School, Lovedale in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. The story of the novel, *The God of Small Things* moves round this very village. The natural ambience, the dialect, and the mannerism of the people everything seems to revolve round this village.⁷ As Arundhati herself recounts:

A lot of the atmosphere in *The God of Small Things* is based on my experiences of what it was like to grow up in Kerala. Most interestingly, it was the only place in the world where religions coincide, there's Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam, and they all live together and rub each other down. When I grew up it was the Marxism that was very strong, it was like the revolution was coming next week. I was aware of the different cultures when I was growing up, and I am still aware of them now. When you see all the competing beliefs against the same background you realize how they wear each other down. To me, I couldn't think of a better location for a book about human beings."⁸

Elaborating further the impact on her of the place and the circumstances of her life, she says:

I think the kind of landscape that you grew up in, it lives in you. I don't think it's time of people who have grown up in cities so much, you may love building, but I don't think you can love a tree or a river or at the colour of the earth, it's a different kind of love. I'm not a very well-read person but I don't imagine that that kind of gut love for the earth can be replaced by the open

landscape. It's a much cleverer person who grows up in the city, savvy, and much smarter in many ways. If you spent your very early childhood in catching fish, and just learning to be quiet, the landscape just seeps into you. Even now I go back to Kerala and it makes me want to cry if something happens to that place. I grew up in very similar circumstances to the children in the book. My mother was divorced. I lived on the edge of the community in a very vulnerable fashion. Then I was 16, I left home and lived on my own, sort of ...you know it wasn't awful, it was just sort of precarious ...living in a squatter's colony in Delhi."⁹

It is, therefore, obvious that Arundhati's was a troubled childhood, for just after a few years of her birth, her father divorced Mary Roy, and she had to return to her village with her mother at Ayemenem. Her mother, a Syrian Christian, broke the tradition by marrying a Bengali Hindu and then divorcing him. She took another revolutionary step in fighting the Christian Inheritance Law, winning a landmark Supreme Court verdict that granted Christian women in Kerala, the right to their parent's property, and an equal share with their male counterparts in their father's property. It is no coincidence that while her mother fought against an archaic law, Arundhati had to fight against a nuisance litigation about the obscenity in her novel which she has won only recently. Perhaps she has inherited the spirit of social activism from her mother and has been ceaselessly championing the cause of the millions of displaced tribal population across the country, exploding the hollowness of the

anti-terrorist movement led by the U.S. A, raising her voice for nuclear disarmament and the nefarious design of the corporate world to destroy our natural wealth in the garb of Operation Green Hunt launched against the Maoists what she calls MOUism (Memorandum of Understanding signed by the government with the Corporate giants). It is, therefore, quite obvious that Arundhati Roy was a child of a broken home of separated parents. She had to go through the hard school of life at a very early stage of life. Moreover, the Ayemenem House was totally a patriarchal set up whereby all the males in the house was hardcore conservatives, and the women had hardly any say. This is beautifully reconstructed in the characters of Ammu, the mother of the boy and girl twins, Estha and Rahel, and their families' tragedies and the countless trials and tribulations she had to undergo.

The God of Small Things is really poetic tale of an Indian boy and girl twins, Estha and Rahel, and the tragic events of their family. The twin's mother is the central figure. A helpless lonely lady, abandoned by her husband and totally neglected by her family members, she meets her sad fate. It shows her continuous struggle to make both ends meet. She struggles, repels but in the end succumbs to the innumerable harms done to her. The plot of the novel is quite complex as it moves both ways — forward and backwards. This makes the narration difficult and complicated. Ammu is very poignantly depicted as the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi. She has a brother named Chako. Ammu has been witness to the severe cruelty meted out to

her mother by her father who had beat her mother with a brass vase.

Like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* Arundhati Roy's, *The God of Small Things* tells the story of a family, and it also narrates the history of the nation's movement from the colonized situation to its condition some years after independence. *The God of Small Things* reflects the Indian society from the seventies onward even though it has been written in the late nineties. The novel mirrors the significant changes that took place in the interactional relationship between the higher and the lower caste during these periods. Roy has remarkably marked the devour of casteism in the Indian society. She highlights the fact that the concept of caste is so deep-rooted in the Indian society that even the educated people find it is difficult to break this ice.

The novel portrays the realistic picture of contemporary Indian society. The relationship of an upper-caste Syrian Christian divorcee, Ammu with the untouchable Velutha creates the main motif of the novel. The tragic love story of Ammu and Velutha forms a new dimension, and it provides sufficient scope for new historical approach. According to P.C. Kar, context of the author "includes his life story and his relationship with his contemporaries, and the nature of the world he lives in, and the kind of forces that have shaped the world" 10

The God of Small Things makes an attack on the conventional notions of Kerala's high-class society, the high caste Syrian Christians and the high caste Hindus. The problem of patriarchal

domination and female subalternity is rooted in the geo cultural reality of Ayemenem. The paradise pickle is the symbol of the small world in Ayemenem House packed with all kinds of species for preservation. The House is the symbol of the old, the worn out and the traditional. Everyone returns to the house; Chacko comes back with the machines for pickles after his marriage to Margaret. Rahel who drifted into an unsuccessful marriage with Larry Mc Caslin, gave up her job to return to the house. Her twin brother Estha who was sent of the father after the funeral of Sophie Mol, returns after 23 years. Ammu, Estha and Rahel's mother, is a rebel. She is a divorced daughter from inter community love marriage. When she comes to the house, she is looking down upon by the people of her society, including her brother Chacko, who considers her and her twins as burden to the family. Ammu's disgrace is not only that she married outside the faith against her parent's wishes but that she subsequently left her abusive and alcoholic husband and was forced to return to the protection of the family, where Chacko rules both home and business—the Padma pickle factory —with a distracted, benevolent tolerance that only underscores his absolute male privilege.

Going deeper into the novel, it is absolutely a poetic tale of an Indian boy and girl twins, Estha and Rahel, and the tragic events of their family. The twin's mother a helpless, lonely young lady abandoned by her husband and totally neglected by the family members, meets her sad fate. The plot of the novel is quite complex because it moves in two

directions—forward and backwards, and this makes the narration difficult and complicated sometime to understand. Ammu is very poignantly characterized as the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi. She has experienced the severe cruelty provided to her mother by the father who even beat her mother with a brass vase:

At Pappachi's funeral, Mammachi cried and her contact lenses slid around in her eyes. Ammu told the twins that Mammachi was crying more because she was used to him than because she loved him. She was used to having him slouching around the pickle factory, and was used to being beaten from time to time. Ammu said that human beings were creatures of habit, and it was amazing the kind of things they could get used to. You only had to look around you, Ammu said, to see that beatings with brass vases were the least of them.¹¹

Ammu experiences a freezing welcome at Ayemenem, and she and her daughters are almost, neglected by the family member, especially by Chacko. Chacko's story is also a story of failure. It is a great fall, points out Surendran:

From a student at Delhi University, a Rhodes scholar at Oxford and a businessman with great ideas, and a lot more. Chacko, the ambitious man failed at crucial moments. He could not come out with flying colours from Oxford to begin with. He was an ardent supporter of communist party, and he had his own dreams about the party. But things did not go as he wanted them to. As a lover and as a husband to he was a failure. The initial

success as a lover was only the beginning of a shattered dream. His Margaret found him not to be a good match, and she shifted her loyalty only to live with Joe.”
12

Ayemenem witnessed almost two divorces or separation of the family though Chacko ignored Ammu in Ayemenem due to her decision of marrying to a person of a different caste although he had himself also married an English lady Margaret. However,, for different causes, situations, and decisions both the marriages are failure, and this causes the return of Chacko and Ammu to Ayemenem. The discrimination took place between daughter and son by their father in the very school-days. Chacko was sent for the higher studies to Oxford while Ammu was denied the same even in India. Chacko's marriage, inspite of having a beautiful daughter, Sophie Mol has a panic end in divorce. So, he returns to India and takes charge of the family and business. Chacko is out-and-out an arrogant man, and he rejects to give the share of the assets to his sister. Ammu has to face a big trouble after the decision of his brother. Chacko sternly claims: “What's yours is mine and what mine is also mine” 13

Roy has pathetically presented the pain which Ammu subsidies within her. She is alone at the age of only twenty-four. The bank of the river and the swimming into it in the midnight are the sources where Ammu relaxes her lonely house of silence and solitude. She was bitterly mocked at and tortured by the old sprinter Baby Kochamma. Kochamma is her father's sister. She used to torture Ammu mentally:

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter, according to The baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage—Baby Kochamma chose to remain quivering silent on the subject.14

Actually, the marriage of Ammu i.e. love marriage was not settled on the highest scale of love affair. It was a marriage ceremony in Calcutta where Ammu and Baba were invited, they saw each other, and it just happened. He was an assistant manager at a tea estate in Assam. Ammu was hesitant whether her parents would approve her proposal. She wrote a number of letters to tell them her decision. Having, but they never replied. As earlier said that from the bondage of their love-marriage Ammu wanted to free herself from the clamouring atmosphere of her family. She imagined a place, where she can live in calm mode. For Ammu anything, anyone at all would be better than returns to Ayamenem. And this anything and anyone resulted to her marriage. But she was unaware of the fact that the man (her husband) is a drunkard. He was a pure alcoholic. The clamour remains again, and she gives birth to her twins Estha and Rahel. Ammu, like a silent sufferer bears the misbehaves of her husband for a long line. Now her children were of the two year in the age that the daily domestic violence between the husbands and wife were out the extreme.

The man stops going to duty, and as a result Mr. Hollick, his manager, orders his dismissal from the Tea estate. He requests to Mr. Hollick not to do so, and confirms that his wife will go to his bungalow to look after. When Ammu knew about it, it was almost unbearable for her to be with him, and she strikes him with the heaviest book there. And she moved from the house with her children:

When his bouts of violence began to include the children, and the war with Pakistan began, Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams. 15

In Ayemenem, Ammu tries to keep busy herself is perhaps to control and console herself. But the statement that not to return to this house always haunts her. Her only dream now was the betterment of the children. For her they were very meek and mild, and she blames herself for their piteous condition:

To Ammu, her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other's company, lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic. Entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs. Ammu watched over them fiercely. Her watchfulness stretched her, made her taut and tense. She was quick to reprimand her children, but even quicker to take offense on their behalf. 16

The outrageous condition of the family blows a new love relationship i.e. of Velutha and Ammu. Velutha, an

untouchable of the village Ayemen, is young and energetic. He is a talented craftsman and a man of unrelenting, rebellions spirit, about whom Mammachi always said;

...if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. He mended radios, clocks, water pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house.17

As Ammu is also crafted by Roy as a young, beautiful rebellious lady, so the similarity between the two, lead to a sexual relationship. Velutha has a kind of respect for Ammu and love for her children. Estha and Rahel develop a deep sense of respect towards him. But fate strikes again, and the whole love affairs comes to an abrupt end. Ammu is locked in a room and Velutha is framed in false charges by Baby Kochamma. Velutha is so badly beaten and tortured by the police at the police station that it ultimately leads to his death. Even Rahel and Estha are forced to give their alibi against him and confirm the truth. Roy has beautifully portrayed how the twins are divested of their innocence:

The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said: Yes.

Childhood tiptoed out.

Silence slid in like a bolt.

Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared.18

As a matter of fact, Arundhati Roy has emerged as the most significant novelist of our time. Dr. R. K. Dhawan has correctly summed up her position "...no other Indian writer has reached in so many parts of the world and won such

enthusiastic response. Her novel *The God of Small Things*, the Booker Award winner has been hailed as a modern classic. It is a feminist novel in the pity and terror that it evokes for the condition of women in a particular milieu. Also, it is an autobiographical novel in the way the facts of the author's life have been distilled into a verbal artefact. The novel has such a rich texture that it is eminently amenable to multiple approaches and interpretation.”¹⁹

Indeed, through this novel Arundhati Roy has enriched the strong tradition of socially powerful English novels in India by highlighting the injustices meted out to the marginalized – women, children, and the low caste; the hypocrisy of politics; the failure of the system; the plundering of the natural wealth through various memorable characters of the novel. “Mammachi, Sophie Mol, Estha, Rahel, Ammu and Velutha will stay with us, popping up once in a while to remind us of some eternal truth.”²⁰ As Prof. Gillian Beer, the chairman of the committee which nominated her for the Booker says, “.....with extraordinary linguistic inventiveness Roy funnels the history of South India through the eyes of seven-year old twins. The story is fundamental as well as local: it is about love and death yet tells its tale quite clearly.”²¹

The main issue is caste and the man-woman relationship, yet other issues such as the theme of confrontation, gender bias, illicit relations, satire on politics, environment, globalization, frontier wars, and overall a scathing attack on

ruthlessness of the system are interwoven into the main narrative. “Thus from the personal journeys of Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha, the reader can move to the larger issues making the novel's meanings seem nearly endless”²² which shows the contemporary novelists forays into newer areas unlike the early novelists who kept themselves limited to certain specific issues.

As a matter of fact, Arundhati Roy is not just a writer, a master prose stylist but also the highest point of contemporary consciousness. She has a clear vision of things. As she herself says, “There's a sort of political vision, a way of seeing, which is just expressed in different ways. Sometimes it's a film, sometimes an architectural thesis, sometimes a novel, sometimes non-fiction, sometimes it's just walking down the street and the way you look.

Fundamentally, running through all these things are a way of examining the relationship between power and powerlessness. I'm very interested in that relentless circular fight.”²³ And in *The God of Small Things*, “her political vision is anti-BIG and pro-small. In Roy's work, small is not merely a reference to size, but connotes harmlessness and powerlessness; it suggests images of children, small animals, unnoticed gestures. Smallness is a form of life, and its representation in language is one of Roy's main concerns.”²⁴ To sum up, it is appropriately to say that *The God of Small Things* acknowledges the condition of the world around us and that too without any

distortions and aberrations, cleared by her above statement.

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