

Social Tyranny in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things"

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Abstract

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, most of the characters cross moral boundaries. Eventually, they all get punished for doing so. In this novel, Roy presents two kinds of morality. One of them is social morality, which can be defined as what a group thinks is good and right or the way one should behave. The other one is individual morality – what oneself thinks is the right way to act. These two kinds of morality inevitably clash. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy presents and, in some way, even encourages her characters to stand in the middle of this clash. She pushes her characters to pursue their personal truths. They are seen reveling in their freedom and courage for doing so. But, eventually, they get punished by their families and society. The *God of Small Things* takes place in the Indian state of Kerala, a state where all the largest religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism – exist. This is the part of India which includes the largest number of Christians, the group to which the Kochamma family belong to. This is also the part of India with the lowest literacy rate in the country. Kerala is described as developed in comparison to other parts of India. However, it is not as developed as one might think or wish it was. In an interview with David Barsamian in the book *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile*, Roy explains that the caste system is still used in Kerala, that "Even among the Syrian Christians – who are the oldest, most orthodox Christians in India – you have caste issues".

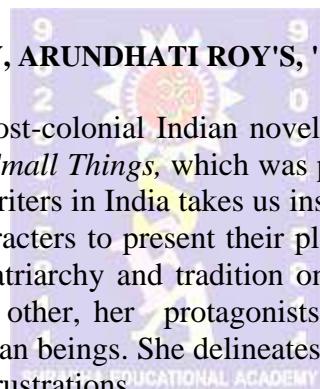
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Introduction:

Arundhati Roy is a commended post-colonial Indian novelist to have bagged the Booker prize for her decisive work *The God of Small Things*, which was published in 1997. Roy as one of the prominent contemporary women writers in India takes us inside the consciousness of her modern educated middle class women characters to present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions. Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and confused and explore ways to fulfill themselves as a human beings. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations.

She claims that the caste system, which is often seen as something made up and used by Hindus, is used all over India, no matter what religion or social class people belong to. In the same interview, Roy tells about the status of women in Kerala. She explains that women from Kerala work and earn their own money, which can be interpreted as high status. Nevertheless, they still "will get married, pay a dowry, and end up having the most bizarrely subservient relationship with their husbands" (Barsamian 5). Both these things – the caste issue and the gender issue – are dealt with in *The God of Small Things*. Probably the biggest issue in the novel is how influenced all parts of society are by social norms, the rules that decide how every single person in their society should, or should not act. These are the rules that underpin both the gender and the caste divisions, social norms that decide that men and women who act similarly should be treated differently and the social norms that also decide that people who have had the misfortune of being born into a low caste have much less rights than people who are born into a high caste.

Arundhati Roy in her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, enacts the eternal drama of confrontation between the powerful and the powerless. The novel deals with class antagonism and class exploitation, the tyranny and injustice that the untouchable have to suffer, the oppression and exploitation of women in a male dominated society and above all, the neglect and humiliation that the dalit and the defenseless have to pass through in class-ridden society. Roy, in one of her interviews proclaims, "It is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest of things and to see how they fit together" (Jahan 166). The



psychological, economic and social problems that play a major role in the novel, devastate men and women alike. The author has desisted from making a woman's powerlessness the central crises. Both men and women are projected as a victim or a tyrant. It must be admitted that a woman's loss of power is treated very sympathetically and yet, there is no obsession with woman's ineffectual condition in society. It is very interesting to note that in the text Roy has carried out covertly emasculation of men by women and also emasculation of women but not in the conventional derogatory sense. Her women learn to think and act independently and take on the role of the protector but in the process do not sacrifice their feminine qualities.

The God of Small Things, as the very title suggests, is a confrontation between the small man and the big man. Velutha, an untouchable, is the most representative of the small man. The treatment meted out to him reflects the typical curse of touchability ingrained in the society. Arundhati Roy shows that the malaise is so deep-rooted in the psyche of Indian people that caste bias surfaces with the slightest provocation even among the most educated and cultured sections of our society. Velutha's grand father Vellya Kelan, along with a number of other untouchables, converted into Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability. But they were treated not at par with other Christians. They were given separate churches, separate services and separate priests. They were called Rice Christians.

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Velutha's victimization and marginalization begins the day when he is born in an untouchable caste. Velutha does not pay serious attention to his father's advise regarding his conduct towards the touchables or high caste people. He has a sharp mind and exquisite carpentry skill. Velutha who belongs to a low caste, evokes our admiration and sympathy for his strength and character in which he is superior to most of the characters of the higher classes. This is one of the implied ironies of the novel, which makes the 'hidden morality' of the novel 'bubble to the surface and float for a while'. This 'hidden morality' indicates the potentiality of the lower classes represented by Velutha. These potentials induce a sense of self respect in Velutha.

It is for his intelligent and technical skills, Velutha is employed as the factory carpenter and incharge of general maintenance. For his superior knowledge and superior position, Velutha is envied by the upper class workers in the factory. According to the touchable factory workers, "Paravans were not meant to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal Paravans like Velutha were not meant to be rehired" (Arundhati Roy, *TGST* 77). Mammachi, the factory owner in the beginning, also has the same thinking. She proudly endorses this class discrimination. Velutha is denied wages at par with the other touchable workers. Roy tell, "Mammachi paid Velutha more than she would a Paravan. Mammachi didn't encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed). She thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan" (*TGST* 77). Mammachi simply vents the prevalent discriminatory ethos when she says about Velutha that "If only he hadn't been a Paravan he might have become an engineer" (*TGST* 75).

The saga of suffering and torture starts with the central female character, Ammu, accompanying her parents to Ayemenem after her father's retirement. Ammu's mother, Mammachi, is beaten every night by her domineering and egoistical husband, Pappachi. A woman is never allowed to grow as an independent and autonomous human being. She is always given a secondary and subservient place in the society. The patriarchal bias against women is evident from the fact that Chacko Ammu's brother is sent to the Oxford for the further studies as, "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposal came ... Ammu grew desperate" (*TGST* 38). Ammu is denied higher education. It is a clear dig at conservative society which holds that higher education erodes the traditional culture of woman and corrupt her. Anees

Jung in *Unveiling India* has opined, “good life it would seem was designed only for men” (Jung 14).

At Ayemenem she lives the life of prisoner and she becomes desperate. She dreams of escaping from the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter long suffering mother. Ammu goes to Calcutta for temporary relief and encounters a gentle Hindu Bengali from the tea estates in Assam, and without further consideration consents to marry him. In fact, a woman is always considered as a weak and vulnerable creature who needs protection and patronage at every stage of her life. This explains why Ammu marries him. Simone de Beauvoir says, “there is an unanimous agreement that getting a husband – or in some cases a ‘protector’ – is for her (woman) the most important of undertakings She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother’s hold, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of new master” (Beauvoir 352).

The charm of marital bliss soon evaporates and Ammu becomes a victim of her husband’s rages. Her husband turns out to be alcoholic who beats her frequently. In fact, wife beating is a deplorable and a dehumanizing practice of human society. Ammu puts up with her husband’s beastly behaviour. Her husband acts as a pimp for his boss Mr. Hollick, the English manager of tea-estate. Then he asks her to accept on indecent proposal of his employer. She refuses and her refusal brings more physical torture. Her husband attacks her, grabs her hair, punches her and also begins to beat the twins (Rahel and Estha). Finding herself vulnerable to male villainy and lechery she returns to her parent’s home. But as a divorced woman, there is no place for her in her father’s home. Like any other estranged woman in Indian society, Ammu lives a miserable life in her parent’s house. She is subjected to taunt and harshness. She soon realizes that life has frozen for her. Her rebellious spirit makes her more and more miserable. In her own home, she becomes ‘Untouchable’. The novelist describes her plight by saying that, “a married daughter has no position in her parent’s home. As for a divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all” (TGST 45). Baby Kochamma has accepted her fate of manless life stoically but she does not feel any sympathy or pity for Ammu. On the contrary, she often becomes the cause of Ammu’s suffering. Ammu is tortured and tyrannized in her parent’s house where as an estranged son Chacko is welcomed as the rightful inheritor of family’s wealth and fortune. Very shamelessly, he tells Ammu, “What’s yours is mine, what’s mine is also mine” (TGST 83).

Ammu do not surrender to her fate but combated with it. In her divorced state she even declares her love for Velutha – An untouchable carpenter Ammu violates ‘the love laws’ and this can not be tolerated in the society. Because of Baby Kochamma, Velutha is dismissed from the factory and imprisoned. He is charged with the rape of Ammu. When Ammu goes to the police station with her children Rahel and Estha, the police officer’s behaviour is very brutal and callous. He stares at Ammu’s breasts as he speaks. He says that the police knows all they need to know and that Kottayam police does not take statements from ‘Veshyas’ or their illegitimate children. Little Rahel is shocked very much because of the rudeness and obscene behaviour of the police officer. Ammu feels helpless and utterly humiliated.

It is indeed the height of irony that when Chacko flirts with women, he is encouraged for his virility; where as the same behaviour on Ammu’s part is condemned as illicit and untraditional, and she is beaten black and blue. She is finally disowned and disinherited by the family. In death, she is alone in a filthy room of Bharat Lodge in Alleppey. She is even denied the dignity of a funeral as “the church refused to bury Ammu” (TGST 162) and she is cremated in an electric crematorium.

Ammu, Pappachi’s daughter recollects her childhood days in Delhi, where her entomologist father used to act like a bully. The author describes, “In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web. He was charming and urbane with visitors, and stopped just

short of fawning on them if they happened to be white. He donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father" (TGST 180).

In *The God of Small Things* the novelist advocates greater social reform in the rigid positioning of women. Mammachi is shown as a helpless woman who is beaten every night with a brass flower vase by her egoistical and domineering husband, Pappachi. It is only with Chacko's, Ammu's brother, intervention that Pappachi stopped this wife-beating operation. With this contact and communication, between the husband and wife is snapped as if violence is the only way to communicate. Roy vividly describes the grim reality of Indian society, "Chacko strode into the room, caught Pappachi's vase hand and twisted it around his back. 'I never want this to happen again,' he told his father. 'Ever' He never touched Mamachi again. But he never spoke to her either as long as he lived" (TGST 48).

So through Ammu and Mammachi, the novelist implicitly, advocates greater social reform in the rigid position of woman. It is to be noted that one of the chief concern of author is to highlight the cause and to describe the piteous plight of the lowly and the lost, the dalit and the deserted. In order to present the true picture of untouchability and other evils of our society the author gives a detailed description of historical facts. The novelist describes the hypocritical moral code of the society. The feminist in Arundhati explains the theme of gender bias by referring to Mammachi's discriminatory attitude towards Ammu. Chacko and Ammu are the children living in a violent household, where the father beats up his wife and daughter. Chacko himself has a failed marriage though he is a Rhodes Scholar, he does not have necessary scholarly nature. He is a divorcee like his sister but leads a more privileged life than her. Ammu is made to feel unwanted in her parent's home after divorce where as an estranged son not only receives warm welcome, he remains the rightful inheritor of the family fortune. Profligacy in him is encouraged in the name of "Man's Needs" (TGST 268). Whereas identical behaviour in a girl is not tolerated in the family. Chacko is the apple of Mammachi's eyes especially after preventing Pappachi from beating up her. Ammu works as hard as him in the Pickle factory but it is always his factory. Ammu thinks that there is nothing extraordinary about Chacko but Mammachi holds the opinion that he is extraordinarily intelligent. He does not manage the factory well and run into debts. A number of women visit him and he has numerous affairs with them. Both Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are aware of this and label it as 'Mans Needs.' They accept it to such an extent that Mammachi has built a different entrance for their convenience. When Ammu has one affair, the family shuts her out; society shuts her out because woman's needs do not exist.

The pertinent observation made by Maitreyi Mukhopadhyay can be safely quoted here: "It should be emphasized that the poor status of women, their oppression and exploitation, cannot be examined as isolated problem in Indian society. Although, the status of women constitutes a problem in most societies in the rigidly hierarchical and inequitable social structure which exists in India, the relative inferiority and superiority in various roles is much more clearly defined. The inequality and subordination of women is an instrument or function of the social structure" (Desai and Patel 82).

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is constituted by two sharply distinct, different worlds. The first of these is the world of Ayemenem, far off Calcutta, Delhi and America. The second world is inhabited by Estha and Rahel and is an imaginary space they create for themselves. The second world, (sub-world) exists in the minds of Estha and Rahel. This world moves along the lines of secrecy and strangeness, Estha and Rahel are common to both worlds. Every certainty is invested with a potentially tragic uncertain element in their lives. These certainties and uncertainties bring the collision between the two worlds. Ammu, Chacko, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma are the inhabitants of first world. The twins live in this world only

on the surface. In Ayemenem there is difference in treatment meted out to Sophie Mol (Chacko's daughter) and the twins. Sophie Mol is loved from the beginning but the twins are expected to pay the price for being loved. Ammu expects good behaviour and unquestioning obedience as her due for loving them, or else she would love them a little less. This is the threat under which the twins live.

At Sophie Mol's funeral Rahel is certain that she is still alive. This firm belief is shaken by the adults who according to Rahel, bury Sophie Mol alive. Similarly when Estha and Rahel are firm in their declaration that Velutha has not kidnapped them, they find the truth removed and replaced with a lie. A similar incident in Rahel's certainty that she has seen Velutha in the procession. Her certainty is declared a falsehood by all the adults who expect Rahel herself to acknowledge her mistake.

These uncertainties that haunt their lives and the certainties that are metamorphosed into disputable truths push Estha and Rahel into creating a world for themselves. In this world they face truths in all their unpleasant lucidity. Estha has no doubt about the bad 'things' that he committed in Abhilash Talkies. Rahel in the same way, is certain of the offensiveness of her actions at school. In this new world, the twins live by their own rules. When Estha is forced to identify Velutha as their kidnapper, he recognizes the falsity of his own words. He invents an escape route—he informs Rahel that the man in the prison in Velutha's brother, Urumban. They believe that Velutha has escaped Africa. They escape from the first world and enjoy of wearing sarees, of taking a boat ride, their friendship with Velutha. All these things are inappropriate in the eyes of the adult world.

Rahel is tired of the attention centred on Sophie Mol and she slips away to seek a comfortable moments of their secret world. Their where, were Velutha treats her with all the elaborate courtesy reserved for adults. Ammu notices them (Velutha and Rahel) when Rahel is being swung by Velutha. Velutha retains his position in the Sub-world but his position is sought and demanded in the first world. Velutha gives into this demand. Ammu is drawn to Velutha and she breaks the love laws. Thus another secret world is created. When the affair between Velutha and Ammu is discovered, then the chance encounter of the two worlds begins the chain of events that leads to the greatest evidence of uncertainty in the lives of twins. Thus, in *The God of Small Things*, there are two—seven-years old twins look at the confusing panorama of life unfolding around them at Ayemenem House. They were nearly born on a bus, which was taking their mother in an advanced stage of pregnancy to the hospital of Shillong. According to Estha, "if they'd been born on a bus, they'd have got free bus ride for the rest of their lives" (TGST 3). So, that is how child's imagination works and how it calculates its chances in life. For children, such an option opens a fabulous world of adventure. They also believe that the government would pay for their funerals if they were killed on a Zebra-crossing. That is what the Zebra-crossing meant for them. But unfortunately there were no such crossing at Ayemenem, nor even at Kottayam, the town nearest to them. The twins have an intuitive sense of knowing who are for them and who against.

The author explains their comments on the every day experience, "While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws. They heard its sickening thud. They smelled its smell and never forgot its History's smell. Like old roses on a breeze" (p. 55). When they are going to Cochin, along with Ammu, Baby Kochamma, in the big Plymoth car of uncle Chacko, they are over taken by a procession of communist marchers at a level crossing, Rahel notices that one of them, waving a red flag and shouting slogans, like the rest of them, is someone they know: "it was Velutha ... She'd have known him anywhere, any time, and if he hadn't wearing a shirt, she would have recognized him from behind. She knew his back. She'd been carried on it" (TGST 73). This is child's way of singling someone who cares for her. The twins have their own system of judging things, people and situations. When Rahel puts on her red sunglasses, the

world becomes angry-coloured. When they get ready to leave for the airport to receive Sophie Mol with her mother, or the twins show their childish fantasies. This incident relates to the thermos flasks they are carrying : “Eagle Vacuum flasks had Vacuum Eagles on them, with their wings spread, and a globe in their talons. Vacuum Eagles, the twins believed, watched the world all day and flow around their flasks all night” (*TGST* 137). This comment shows how the imagination of little children works. Rahel and Estha break the rules and make love as adults. They are finally letting go of their grief through action – they set themselves free from the burden of their ‘small things’: “Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons” (*TGST* 328).

So, they finally feel as though they are back home, even as they violate community norm. Roy portrays the act of love making as beautiful but it is mad bizarre by the fact that Estha must perform a grotesque act. Rahel and Estha’s relationship has its own ironic parallel and foreshadowing in the evidently incestuous love that Mamachi feels towards Chacko : “The day that Chacko prevented Pappachi from beating her ... Mamachi packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko’s care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her man. Her only love” (*TGST* 168).

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Velutha is warned and dismissed from the job. Velutha and Vellya Paapen are representative characters who show the degraded and discriminated life being lived by the people belonging to low castes. Baby Kochamma, Ammu’s aunt, for the sake of family honour, misreports and misinforms the police about Velutha’s alleged involvement in kidnapping of children and the subsequent death of Sophie Mol, grand daughter of Mamachi. And finally in police custody, Velutha is tortured to death, “Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from” (*TGST* 319-320). Apart from class and caste discrimination, Arundhati Roy also seems to lambaste the artificiality and duplicity inherent in politics. Very subtly, the message is passed on that the politicians who are double faced like the players of the stage. The political characters described in the novel range from the former chief minister of Kerala, Mr. E.M.S. Namoodiripad to common party worker Velutha.

To sum up through these psychological ingredients, incidents, Arundhati Roy seems to present a trenchant critique of the present day Indian society in which people are suffering from trauma leading to so many physical and mental absurdities. *The God of Small Things*, says Cowley; one of the fine booker judges, “fulfils the highest demand of the art of fiction: to see the world, not conventionally or habitually, but as if for the first time” (Cowley 3).

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