



**A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S
*THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Postcolonial' applies the notion that the novel or be it any piece of writing for that matter, goes beyond every possible parameters of the locality, region and nation to participate in the global scenario today which is an aftermath of European colonization. This paper examines the cultural and social implications which exist in *The God of Small Things* written by Indian postcolonial writer Arundhati Roy. The novel does reveal a decisive post colonial condition; through its dialogues, characters and various events and instances it encompass. The study analyzes Roy's work according to the postcolonial theory and gives importance to the premises of main theorist in this field. Postcolonial literary texts like Roy's are rewritings of colonial and postcolonial images.

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INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's postcolonial novel *The God of Small Things* (cited hereafter as *TGST*) presents and reflects the issues of the postcolonial period. It tells the story of a Syrian Christian family in southern province of Kerala, India. The main plot is constructed around this family; retired imperial entomologist Pappachi Kochamma is the father of the family. Upon retiring from his job in Delhi he returns back to his hometown Ayemenem with his wife, Mammachi Kochamma, and his two children Ammu and Chacko. Ammu their daughter several years after their arrival experience an unhappy marriage with a Hindu man, which end in divorce. Ammu after divorce comes back to her parental house with her twins, Estha and Rahel. Ammu and her twins begin to live in Ayemenem with Mammachi, Chacko, and their aunt, Aunt Baby. Chacko, the son of the family is sent to Oxford to continue his education, where he meets his future

English wife Margaret but their marriage ends in divorce in the same year, then, Chacko leaving Margaret and his daughter Sophie Mol, in England, comes back to Ayemenem to his father's home.

Roy's story revolves around the events surrounding the visit made by Sophie Mol Chacko's daughter and his ex-wife Margaret and the drowning of Sophie two weeks after their arrival, leaving behind a disintegrated family. The family's suffering from Sophie Mole's drowning become great when Ammu the daughter of the family experience a love affair with Velutha the families carpenter, a man from the 'untouchable' or Paravan caste. Ammu's love affair with a member of an untouchable caste is considered a forbidden love according to the caste system in India, which divides people into classes and makes the lower class people 'untouchable'. Risking to interact with one of these untouchables, Ammu violates the caste system, which also causes the family to fall apart

and also, Ammu's twins, Estha and Rahel to be separated from each other. Roy's story begins twenty three years later, when Rahel comes back to home in India, to Estha where there is desire that the love of the twins for each other will heal their deep suffering. Rahel comes back to Ayemenem as an adult to "a decimated household, a dysfunctional twin and a decaying house" (TGST 45).

Discussion

In "Black Skin, White Masks", Fanon suggests that "Colonialism, with its explicit conceptual under-pinnings of white racial superiority over non-white peoples, has created a sense of division and alienation in the self-identity of the non-white colonized people" (67). The history, culture, language, customs and beliefs of the white colonizers are imposed on the colonized and they are eventually coaxed to consider them as universal, normative and superior to their own local indigenous culture. This creates a strong sense of inferiority in the colonized subject and leads to an adoption of the language, culture and customs of the colonizers by the colonized as a way of compensating for these feelings of inferiority in their self-identity. This creates a divided sense of self in the subject formation of the colonized. Through this study I intend to do a post colonial analysis of the novel. 'Post colonialism', the term itself is in want of a cohesive definition. It contains within it historical and geographical notions. All post colonial experiences are nearly the same regardless of history. To conquer, to subjugate, to occupy and to dominate another being are all intrinsic colonial stops.

This discussion has also been formulated against issues like identity, hybridity, cultural differences and conflict. Roy's novel, even though complex, incoherent and fragmented, conveys a deeper meaning that runs into notions regarding human perspectives, values and attitudes of a post colonial nation. The relation between India and English has been a long and troublesome one. In India, the cultural impact of imperialism dominated the urban elite class and the semi westernized upper and lower middle classes. The women writers of postcolonial India too hail from either elite or moderate backgrounds and their writings reflected

their experiences. Arundhati Roy capitalizes on her straddling of different cultures as an Indian writer writing in English by making this a crucial element in the identities of her major protagonists.

The twins portrayed in the novel are often found speaking Malayalam and English. Their world itself is plotted by a whole range of western references. Rahel expresses her love for her mother Ammu by quoting Kipling's Jungle Book: "We be of one blood, ye and I" (TGST 329). We also find that Estha is an ardent fan of Elvis Presley. These can be traced as instances of self betrayal. They identify themselves with things and people which are alien to them.

In the novel Chacko Kochamma, the uncle of the twins, describe the colonized people as 'prisoners of war', as a result of which their dreams have been doctored and they belong nowhere. According to him, it is a kind of war that has occupied their minds that they "have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made them adore their captures and despise themselves" (53). Frantz Fanon in his *A Dying Colonialism* (1965), argues that,

The challenging of the very principle of foreign domination brings about essential mutations in the consciousness of the colonized, in the manner in which he perceives the colonizer, in his human states in the world. (Gandhi 130)

Seeing themselves inferior, the colonized people recognized that the only way to make their situation better is to become similar to the colonizer, and thus, they try to imitate the colonizers ideas, values and practices. They appreciate and value the colonizers way of living and try to imitate their culture in view of not having of their own. Roy in narrating Chacko's thoughts reports:

Chacko told the twins though he hated to admit it, they were all anglophile. They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at

night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. 'To understand history, 'Chacko said, we have to go inside and listen to what they're saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smells the smells. (TGST 52)

Roy in her novel narrates clearly how the colonized people appreciate the English culture and their considerable effort to become like them by way of imitation. There are seen perfectly in different behaviors of the natives in the novel toward the half English Chacko's daughter Sophie Mole and her Indian twin cousins, Rahel and Estha. When Chacko's half English daughter Sophie and her mother Margaret come to India, everybody in the family is impatiently awaited for their arrival. Sophie Mole's half English identity is important both for the members of the family and for the people outside. The importance of an English cousin can be obviously presented in the speech of a man from outside the family where Roy illustrates the scene as the following:

The twins squatted on their haunches, like professional adults gossip in the Ayemenem market. They sat in silence for a while. Kuttappen mortified, the twins preoccupied with boat thought. 'Has Chacko Saar's Mol come?' Kuttappen asked.

Must have Rahel said laconically.
Where is she?

Who knows? Must be around somewhere. We don't know.

Will you bring her here for me to see?

Can't, 'Rahel said.

Why not? She has to stay indoors. She's very delicate. If she gets dirty she'll die. (209)

The appreciation in his question about the Sophie Mol is more like to that of the Lemon drink man, who sells beverages at the cinema, when he learns that Sophie is coming he says "from London's? A new respect gleamed in uncle's eyes. For a family with London connections"(110). Roy's protagonists, Rahel and Estha are suffering from the great admiration of their family for the English language

and culture. They obtain their love of the family if they behave in English manners and hold English values. They are the children who are forced to neglect their own language and does not have any importance, and who "had to sing in English in obedient voices" (154). Baby Kochamma, the twin's aunt corrects Estha when he makes a mistake in pronouncing an expression where he says "Thang God" (154). For Rahel and Estha speaking in English is a kind of obligation. They have been deprived of their own history, culture, values and language for many years by the colonizers, and they cannot survive themselves from the facts of colonialism. The twin's aunt always forces them to talk in English. Roy narrates this situation as the following:

That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines - 'impositions' she called them - *I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English*. A hundred times each. When they were done, she scored them with her pen to make sure that old lines were not recycled for new punishments. She had made them practice an English car song for the way back. They had to form the words properly, and be particularly careful about their production. (36)

The important fact here is that the contamination of the colonized is not their admiration for the English or their efforts to imitate them, but their inability to belong to neither the culture of the colonized nor that of the colonizer and they experience an identity problem. The colonized is alienated by imitating the culture of the colonizer from their own culture and at the same time the skin colour and national origin of the colonized estranged them from the English culture. Thus, they gain a hybrid identity, a mix between native and colonial identity, neither fully one nor the other. Most of the problem about hybrid identities lies in its existence, which is, as Bill Ashcroft highlights, "the cross-breeding of the two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a

third, 'hybrid' species" (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader* 118).

Skin colour and race are seen to create a very different sort of power structure. A white skin is an ideal of beauty which leaves anyone with dark skin in a lower bracket. The impression that Sophie Mol leaves for herself is, "hated, bell bottomed and loved from the beginning" (*TGST* 186). This out of the bounds glorification of the west is peculiar of the entire family's behaviour especially in Baby Kochamma's. The sense of inferiority complex at being Indian makes her speak with an artificial accent and ask Sophie Mol questions on Shakespeare's *Tempest*. "All this was of course primarily to announce her credentials to Margaret Kochamma (Chacko's English wife). To set herself apart from the Sweeper class" (144).

In other words, this ambivalent cultural identity does not belong definitely to the world of either the colonizer or the colonized. It is presented as an 'other' from both cultural identities. This mixed identity, hybridity, "has been recently associated with the work of Homi Bhabha, whose analysis of colonizer/colonized stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivity. Bhabha maintains that "all the cultural statements and systems are structured in a space that he 'names third' the third space of the enunciation" (*The Location of Culture* 37). Cultural identity always comes out in this contradictory and ambivalent space which for Bhabha constructs the argument to a hierarchical 'purity' of cultures. Bhabha puts this in this way:

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems, are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. Fanon's vision of revolutionary cultural and political change as a 'fluctuating movement' of occult instability could not be articulated as cultural *practice* without an

acknowledgement of this indeterminate space of the subject(s) of enunciation. It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (74)

Roy in her story presents perfectly her twin protagonists Rahel and Estha as two hybrid characters. Notwithstanding, the twins, try not to imitate the English values and language, but they cannot escape from feeling inferior when they compare themselves to their half English cousin, Sophie Mol, since they are just the imitation of English, not real ones. Roy depicts the difference between the twins and Sophie Mol throughout the novel.

Pappachi Ammu's father is a man who after retiring from Government service in Delhi having worked for many years as an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute, and who come to live in Ayemenem with his wife, Mammachi, his son Chacko and his daughter Ammu till he dies. Pappachi tries always to imitate the English way of clothing and as Roy illustrates "until the day he died, even in the stifling Ayemenem heat, even single day, Pappachi wore a well prepared three-piece suit and his gold pocket watch" (*TGST* 49).

Although Pappachi's admiration to English culture is great but he is not able to the reality that he is not English in origin. Despite his big endeavour to be similar to English culture, he does it just in appearance, not in his manner, his way of thinking and attitudes. For instance, he is against to her daughter's education where he "insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (38), thereby, he let his daughter finish her school life the same year that he retires from his job in Delhi and moves to Ayemenem. Regarding to his wife's, Mammachi's, during a few month day spend in Vienna, she takes a violin course, the situation is quite similar to that of Ammu's, teacher, Launskuy Tieffethal, made the mistake of telling Pappachi that his wife was exceptionally talented and, in his

opinion, potentially concert class. Pappachi does not tolerate any kind of success she achieves inching her talent in playing the violin.

Upon Pappachi's recognition that the jam and pickle is sold quickly and his wife's business getting better, he becomes irritated, so, he not only prefer not to help her with her works, but also beats her every night. Roy describing the scene concerning Pappachi's thoughts and attitudes states that:

Chacko came home for a summer vacation from Oxford. He had grown to be a big man, and was, in those days, strong from rowing from Balliot. A week after he arrived he found Pappachi beating Mammachi in the study. 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. (48)

Although Pappachi tries to appear as a civilized man, he cannot overcome to his other identity which makes him beat his wife, "with a brass flower vase every night, and who "broke the bow of her violin and threw it in the river" (48).

The situation is the same for Chacko, Pappachi's son, because he also is another character who suffers from the hybridization process in terms of not belonging to either the culture of the colonized or that of the colonizer. Roy in reporting Chacko's suffering of hybridization states that: "our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (53). This point highlights that the colonized always look down upon and scorns their own culture, thereby they are uprooted from their culture and appreciates whatever the colonizer has; therefore, they try to imitate them without being to be a member of it on account of not being European in blood. Chacko educated at Oxford University, realizes that their country and mind have been captured by the colonizer and he depicts his own people as "anglophile, a person well disposed to the English" (52). However, he himself is aware of being an anglophile, when he comes to loving

something that belongs to the English culture. His anglophile identity is approved when he gets married to an English woman. As Ammu, his sister regards it on as marrying the conquerors. Chacko like his father's admiration of the English way of clothing appreciates the manners and attitudes an English woman has.

Roy in giving the reason why Chacko admires Margaret, which is a kind of looking up down on Indian women, reports that,

He was grateful to his wife for not wanting to look after him. For not offering to tidy his room. For not being cloying mother. He grew too depend on Margaret Kochamma for not depending on him. He adored her for not adoring him. (246)

Although Chacko appreciates his English wife for not wanting to look after him, unlike his Indian mother, the same English woman leaves him just because he is not used to looking after himself, which is quite clear in the following description:

That it was impossible for him to consider making the bed, or washing clothes or dishes. That he didn't apologize for the cigarette burns in the new sofa. That he seemed incapable of buttoning up his shirt, knotting his tie and tying his shoe laces before presenting himself for a job interview. (247)

The important point that arises here is that his marriage to a married woman becomes successful to the extent that he is able to hide his real Indian Identity and plays his role successfully as the husband of an English woman. The reason their marriage ends in divorce results in the interaction between his own culture as the colonized and the culture of his wife as the colonizer and his belonging to neither of them. Although Chacko and Pappachi do their best to look like the colonizer both in manner and attitudes, they become the victims of the interaction with the colonizers' culture that is regarded as superior. Despite their endeavor to imitate the colonizer, considering their behavior throughout the novel it is impossible for them to escape from their own identity, being Indian in blood, not English. Roy, as a postcolonial writer, in

her novel tries to focus on the sufferings of the colonized originated from the interaction with the colonized.

The power structures are carefully delineated in the novel. Mammachi, Baby kochamma, the policemen etc stand aloof within their realms of power and they see to it that the transgressors- Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha, who hold no power in the social hierarchies, remain vulnerable and hence overruled. It is quite a notable fact that the characters in the novel although they have adopted the Western ways to suit their needs they remain stubbornly centered onto the power structures their tradition had bestowed upon them. Pappachi (Estha and Rahel's grandfather), for instance, he is the British entomologist who is hailed a British gentleman in the whole of Ayemenem. Even after his retirement he refuses to go around in Indian clothes and followed Western suiting. He drove a Plymouth and smoked a cigar. Despite all the outwardly British trappings he remained a chauvinist at heart. He beat his wife and children and he resented his wife's success at the pickle factory and her ability to play violin.

The children who are small things in the novel are the worst affected of all. They go against the rule and make velutha, who is a 'paravan', an untouchable, their God – The God of small things. He is their best friend, because he lets them be, and also becomes a part of their world. As Rahel grows up she realizes that,

It is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought, to ruin a fragment of a dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do (190).

The powerless being taken advantage of by the powerful. The orange- lemon drink man sexually exploits Rahel at the film theatre and leaves her frightened and insecure.

In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern - a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern....Many

people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'...They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. (Spivak 128)

In the novel 'the other' has been made out of the children, Velutha and even Ammu. At some point of time or the other, they are discriminated against; the children by Ammu and their grand aunt Baby kochamma, Ammu by her aunt and Velutha by the so called land lords of the clan.

In the novel, the English figure as a typical colonizer in the form of Mr. Hollick and as a liberated decolonizer as Father Mulligan who is a spiritually elevated man. Ammu's husband, Babu, almost lost his job due to excessive alcoholism and he requests his 'superior' Mr. Hollick (Babu's boss at the Assam tea estate) not to sack him. To which Hollick says "well actually there may be an option... perhaps we could work something out...you are a very lucky man wonderful family, beautiful children, an extremely attractive wife" (TGST 41).

He shamefully suggests that Ammu should to be sent to his Bungalow to be looked after. The appearance of British as exploiters suggests a post-colonial tendency. They act as instruments of imperial oppression trying to crush down the colonized to the very extent of extreme pathos. Characters like Hollick symbolize the cruelty and carnality of the superior planter class. They strike a glaring contrast to the impoverished labour class. A recent tendency shows a shift in stance in terms of portraying English as paragons of cruelty. They cease to be dark figures of villainy and crime. They are portrayed as more individualized and aware. Such a newer version of the British figure is Father Mulligan in the novel. He is a priest in Ayemenem and later he relinquishes Christianity and takes up Hinduism and becomes an ardent follower of Lord Vishnu. Despite the knowledge of Baby Kochamma's (Ammu's aunt)

staunch affection for him, he never takes advantage of her and remains on friendly terms with her until his death.

Conclusion

Besides Roy's hybrid characters which can be understood as an evidence of the contamination arrived with the colonizer, in order to prove how dreadful suffering the arrival of the colonizer has brought to the colonial land, the day on which Sophie Mol come to India is used as metaphorically, and it stands for the coming of the colonizers. Sophie Mol with her English mother Margaret comes from England to India to see her Indian father, Chacko. Her coming to India is important because it stands for that of the colonizer and in what ways it has brought about the sufferings of the people in the colonial territory. Roy explains throughout the novel the great influence of Sophie Mol in disturbing the tranquil situation in India and the destructive effects of her visit. The most shattering effects can be seen in the Estha and Rahel character, both of whom "hadn't seen each other since Estha's return in a train with his pointy shoes rolled into his khaki hold all"(32).

Rahel immediately after separation of Estha from Ayemenem loses her mother Ammu, too. Rahel also loves her Ayemenem and her twin brother and wander from school to school. On the whole, Sophie Mol's arrival to India changed their faith and caused all these disastrous events. The life in Ayemenem before her arrival was peaceful and tranquil. Roy in illustrating the Ayemenem maintains that "Here, however, it was peace time and the family in the Plymouth traveled without fear or foreboding" (35). Sophie Mol's arrival representing the colonizer disturbs the peaceful life in Ayemenem. This is obviously observable when Roy portrays the situation as,

You couldn't see the river from the window anymore... and their has come a time when uncles became fathers, mother's lovers and cousins died and had funerals. It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened. (31)

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