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“THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS”: AS BREATH TAKING BEAUTY

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ABSTRACT

Indian English fiction writers write about the era in which they live and it is fully reflected in their works. Writers in India go through two different periods – colonialism and post-colonialism. Colonialism gave birth to the Indo – Anglian literature which refers to the works of writers who penned down their writing in the English language and their mother tongue – one of the local languages in India. The first English book written by an Indian *Sake Dean Mahomet* is *Travels of Dean Mahomet* in 1793. And because English is the international language, Indian writers' written words and thoughts catch the attention of the readers all over the world. Writers like R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Mulk Raj Anand, Amitav Ghosh, Raja Rao, Rohinton Mistry, Kamala Markandya, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others wrote about the social situation in their writings. Nowadays our society is afflicted with plenty of problems and our contemporary writers try to bring forth all these issues. The present paper aims at fixating on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, a novel that touches the directly or indirectly all realistic scenario that is occurring in the society. It's set in the Kerala region. This study provokes the few concepts that are discussed by Roy in her work through the way of realistic pattern. She used the stream of consciousness technique for her novel. She is a revolutionary writer, who protects the helpless without worrying about her status and also suggest the path for women who suffered severely at the hands of patriarchal society.

Keywords: Cultural Context, Big and Small Things, Language, The Subaltern, Feminist Reading

Introduction

The success of any piece of writing is measured in terms of the critical acclamation and the fine feedback it fetches from readers. The appreciation or criticism is actually not in the hands of the writer as he is hardly not involved in the work composed by him. Once he completes his writing, his duty is over and it is here that the readers take the command as active participators to decide the fate of the author and his piece of writing. Here

quoting Roland Barthes, a French literary critic would be helpful. He in his essay *The Death of the Author* dismisses the notion of the writer's authority on the text rather generates a reader-response theory, "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."¹

Similarly, readers rated this outstanding piece of the novel, according to their positive or negative reactions. The rave reviews received by

the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy led to the consideration that it should be taught in the University courses, but at the same time, the novel has been controversial from the word go since its publication in 1997. Roy became the first non-expatriate Indian woman, who won the Booker Prize for Fiction. Readers amply admired her novel and regarded it as magical, close to perfection, and breathtakingly beautiful. Concerned with the social and political issues of the society, the novel is a notable example of the South Asian fiction by women in the Postcolonial literature. Arundhati Roy as an author explained her purpose that is, "To never complicate what is simple, to never simplify what is complicated [and.....] to be able to communicate to ordinary people what is happening in the world."²

It is said that *The God of Small Things* is a semi-autobiographical novel. Roy has attractively mixed the actual and imagined events which go hand in hand in her novel. She exposes how the caste, race, gender, class affect human relationships. The story of the novel is related to the three generations of females who suffered in their own time periods because of different customs in society. Arundhati used the stream of consciousness technique in which past and present go together. Rahel is the witness of tragedy in Ayemenem house or she describes the elements of her childhood experiences as well. The woman's condition was not much better during the time when this story was being written. South Indians' social status like untouchability, caste discrimination, political upheaval and the congress in the 1970 is reflected through this novel. Fiction emerged from the reality and therefore, for the understanding of Roy's writing the major events of her life are needed to be analysed. *The God of Small Things* draws together factors of the psychological drama, fairy tale, tragedy, pastoral lyric, and political fable. It is a Bildungsroman type of novel, narrated in the first person by Ammu's children Estha and Rahel. The story pivots around the relationship between Ammu and a lower caste 'untouchable' Velutha, and the significant events – Sophie Mol's death by drowning, cross caste, affairs and Velutha's murder by the police. The

circumstances of the post-colonial times are same as in the colonial date, in this sense Roy presents the aspects of the post-colonial in her novel. She says that even after the sixty years of independence, the situation of Indian system is the same till now. *The God of Small Things* is such a remarkable piece of writing in Indian English literature. It explores every concept of the human life. It has greatly influenced the reader from its very first reading.

Cultural Context: Arundhati Roy's novel deals with the Indians smallest minorities Syrian Christian. It represented their history and Hindu caste system. There are four castes existing in the Hindu society from the time of creation. They play their role, according to the work in the theatre of the world.

"When [the god] divided the Man, into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two things and his two feet called? His mouth was the Brahmin [the priest class], his arms were made into the nobles [ksatriyas], his two thighs were the populace [vaisyas], and from his feet the servants [sudras] were born. The moon was born from his mind; the sun was born from his eye."³

Thus, we see the division of caste into Brahmins as priest, Ksatriyas service in the military, Vaisyas involved in trade or business, and Sudra performed labor or menial tasks. They all have different duties. The upper caste doesn't present the Hindu society clearly. The untouchable Sudra group, who have always been dependent on the rich caste and doing the activities as street sweeping, leatherwork, disposing of the dead, and rubbish collection, shows the obvious picture of the society. In *The God of Small Things* Velutha, a Paravan belongs to an untouchable group. His affair with Ammu becomes the cause of his death because Ammu belongs to the upper caste. Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father illustrated the cruel reality of the colonial period when modest people were not permitted to dress up their upper body, take umbrellas, or their appearance on the roads. The highest caste in Kerala, the Namboodiri Brahmins, when walked on the road, a servant named Nayar warns all the lower caste members to hide or even

their shadows. Bias, discrimination is the central theme of this novel and its concentration on the caste oppression or the condition of Kerala in post-independence time makes it the part of the fiction in Dalit Sahitya Akademi of untouchable Literature. In 1999, Arundhati Roy speaks about the translation of the book in Malayalam language and in her speech addressing the audience of Malayalam, "I know that you share the anger [.....] at that heart of *The God of Small Things*. It is an anger that the 'modern' metropolitan world, the other end [the one in which I now live], tends to overlook because for them it's something distant something unreal." ⁴

Big and Small Things: Roy makes a connection between the powerful and the powerless by challenging the boundaries that are set up by history. The caste system, marriage, and political affiliations are the big things in the society, but Roy writes about the small things as well in her novel. Like Baby Kochamma and Comrade Pillai are not able to think about the big things as a mystery, promises, sensitive creatures, and guilt. Their concern is to discover the place in the river and the historic house only. Velutha, who belongs to untouchable, enjoys life's small pleasures such as playing with Estha and Rahel and his love affair with Ammu, without a thought about the big facet. He is called The God of Loss. The relationship of Ammu and Velutha is a symbol of future change without worried the difference of caste and ethnic. Another small thing is that there is always someone who is watching us all the time and we are never alone. Estha and Rahel being children are not considered as big things. In the family small things were happening: Rahel's fear of Ammu's love for her, Estha's molestation, Sophie Mol's death and so on. The novel is an interconnection of the small things to the big ones:

"The God of Small Things is a book which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest. Whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water in a pond or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom, your bed, into the most intimate

relationships between people-parents and children and siblings and so on." ⁵

Language: Roy uses the language in a way that expresses the whole idea about her thoughts. She states in one of her interviews that the language as 'the skin of my thought'. ⁶ In *The God of Small Things* Roy incorporated quotes, phrases, proverbs, songs, and road signs, etc. from *The Sound of Music*, Kipling, and Shakespeare. The language writing pattern closely resembles lingering or blank verse and it challenges the boundaries of prose with the reversed words, repetitions, nonstandard spellings, and neologism. For example, in many places, she has used child – language which demonstrates the harshness of the world. Roy herself accepted that her linguistic experiments sometimes are against the narrative technique also. Through the repetition, she feels safe and it became a lullaby to her. It is a noticeable thing that Roy's experiments show explicit political and social concerns. Early Indian Novelists, who wrote in English, used the medium or language of the colonial times. But she presents a multilingual society in India and her protagonists express different kinds of languages that are the result of their cultural impact on them, 'Estha and Rahel couldn't call [Chacko] Chachen because when they did, he called them Chetan and Cheduthi. If they called him Ammaven he called them Appoi and Ammai [...] So they called him Chacko' (Ch. 2, p. 37). It shows that sometimes language is not easily translated. We came to know from the novel that the English pronunciation of an Indian is fun for her. In *The God of Small Things* words like America pronounced as 'Amayrica' (p. 129), Divorced as 'Die – vorced' (p. 130), Pronunciation as 'Prer NUN sea ayshum' (p. 154), always as 'Orlways' (p. 154), fatal as 'fatle' (p. 158), infinite as 'infinnate' (p. 301), exactly as 'eggzackly' (p. 324) etc. This novel also a unique piece in linguistic experiments. Roy breaks the conventional rule of writing and established a new one for her own intention. She has given the credit of inventing the new style of writing which is different from the other Indian novelists.

The subaltern: Arundhati Roy in her novel also focuses on the distance between the powerful and the powerless in the modern times. She states,

“At some point; we have to [...] realize that the inequity in our society has gone too far. Take for instance the refrain that India is a country of one billion people [...] the truth is that we are a nation of 50 million and the rest are not treated as people.”⁷ Before examining the study of the Subaltern in her novel, the introduction of this term is needed here. The subaltern is a word that refers to the lowest rank in the British Army, coined by Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s. He used it as a political term in his *Prison Notebook* for describing the groups or losses. Later on, many critics used this term for Subaltern Studies. But today by implication it explores the status of marginalized people. Gayatri Spivak wrote the most famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*, to analyze the condition of the subaltern in the society.

At *The God of Small Things* Velutha is represented as a subaltern, who is only allowed to speak in a limited way. He appears as a body and the object of desire and fears of other characters. Another figure of Subaltern is Ammu, a divorced woman and has the relation with Velutha. Spivak says in her essay that Subaltern wants to speak, but there is no one else ready to hear them. Similarly, Velutha wants to speak when he is beaten by the police officer and is not listened to only because he belongs to the lower caste. Even society banned other spokespeople, who desire to support their rights. In the novel, the character of Mammachi always becomes an easy target and prey of the patriarchy. Pappachi tortures her physically and mentally. She is a Subaltern in her own house.

Feminist Reading: A feminist reading of *The God of Small Things* provides a most rewarding insight. Feminism based consciousness arose in the Western countries, later on, came in the Asian continent. Indian women, who began writing in the English language first raised the questions about the women's freedom in the Orthodox world. Feminism is a kind of awareness in women about their rights, social justice or exploitation. Gayatri Spivak and Chandre Talpade Mohanty chose the issues from European and American Feminism to illustrating the women's position. Feminism in Roy's novel is a sort of promotion of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and

Luce Irigaray's theories about it. The relevance of the novel is obviously reflected in the child's speech pattern. The awareness about the women's social justice emerged in Arundhati Roy's mind when she was in college in New Delhi:

“In college in New Delhi I first encountered people who were actively committed to Marxist politics, but the talk of a noble working class seemed very very silly to me. Every time I stepped out of my college campus I would be brutalized [...] by men. It made no difference whether they were proletarian or not [...] The only real [political] conflict seemed to me to be between women and men.”⁸

As noted, the novel demonstrates the status of a daughter in the South Indian Patriarchal families. Feminism identified by Ammu when her husband said to her, pleased the boss, she rejects and her marriage end in divorced. Roy depicts her feminist perspectives through the female characters as Mammachi, Ammu, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. The first generation of the woman's character is Imperial Entomologist Pappachi's wife Mammachi. She beat brutally by her husband and tortured mentally and physically. When her son Chacko protects her, Pappchi then stop speaking to her. Mammachi is also a brave woman, who employ Velutha a downtrodden (Paravan), a Dalit. Whose ancestors have been working Chacko. She plays a role as a businesswoman and a submissive housewife. The other character is Ammu, who belongs to the second generation. She is not a well-known daughter in the family because she did not practice the continual process of arranged marriage and get divorced. Then she realizes her position in her own home, “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 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. (The God of Small Things P. 45) Her brother, who also divorced from love-marriage, enjoys everything in his life. He studied from Britain, but Ammu not allowed to get higher study

because Pappachi said that college education corrupt a woman. Ammu's aunt, Baby Kochamma becomes her sworn enemy. Ammu is a tragic figure, who struggling against her own family. As Ranga Rao states, "In Ammu, the novelist has presented, with compassion, a woman, a feminist locked in a struggle with her family, its 'hidden morality', with society and tragically with herself." ⁹ Then there is Rahel, who is included in the third generation interrupts the laws of love. She is the one who commits incest and doesn't abide the laws established by males. She becomes the inspirational figure about the social alteration.

Conclusion

To sum up, *The God of Small Things* is an outstanding fiction work in which Roy discusses the actual factors of life. Her major concern is portraying the picture of the characters' psyche that is opposed to R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Bhabani Bhattacharya. The quest for identity in her characters is different from 'Savithri' in R. K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* and 'Madeleine' in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. To her, literature is not a means of escaping from reality, rather it is an inquiry. So in this novel, Roy presents the real phenomena of Indian society.

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