



## THE RUDIMENTS OF HUMOR AND NOSTALGIA IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

ANDRIA BABU

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities & Sciences (English), Rajalakshmi Engineering  
College, Thandalam

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ANDRIA BABU

### ABSTRACT

The focus of this research paper is to bring out the elements of nostalgia and humour in *The God of Small Things*. Though, all the characters in the novel experience a sense of loss and difficulties in relationships, their past days were filled with pleasant incidents. The novelist as well as the characters tends to escape the bitter reality and tend to seek solace in their good old memories. The novelist has entwined all the happenings in the lives of the protagonists with a sense of humour. *The God of Small Things* bagged the coveted Booker Prize for literature in the year 1997. It presents a fine correspondence between feelings, and from matter to manner. Though Indian fiction is replete with many great authors, yet Roy's contribution to English fiction is a 'precious laurel in the crown of Indian fiction' (Dhawan, 67)

**Key words:** nostalgia, childhood innocence, sibling relationship, humor and wit, word play.

The novel, *The God of small things* as a Bildungsroman, narrates the story about the childhood experiences of a pair of fraternal twins who become victims of the circumstances and how even the small incidents in their life pave a great impact on their psyche.

The plot of the novel revolves around the life of Rahel and Estha in the period of 1969. They live in their grandmothers place Ayemenem in Kottayam district of Kerala. As an autobiographical novel, it throws light on the early life of the novelist. In fact Arundhati Roy's early life was full of struggles.

The characters in the novel too are a replica of her kith and kin. The character of Ammu in the novel represents Mary Roy- Arundhati Roy's mother. Ammu is a south Indian but she is married to a Bengali. There are so many cultural differences in the novel that leads to an array of problems. There

had been intolerable conflicts in her marital life and finally the couple gets divorced. Thus she is overburdened with the sole responsibility of bringing up her two children. Lalit Kumar Christopher Roy, the novelists' brother is portrayed as Estha and Arundhati Roy herself is portrayed as Rahel in the novel. Roy also brings in her grandfather and his large family into the recollection of the novel.

Roy has depicted her innocent childhood days through the perception of an adult who delights in her past and longs for it. In spite of focusing on the miseries and chaos around her she tries to centre on the nostalgic elements.

The novel begins with the description of the arrival of rains in Ayemenem coinciding with the arrival of Rahel from America. The comparisons reveal how an author can very effortlessly transport the readers to the remote past- to the glorious

world of the childhood of Rahel and Estha .Roy tells the readers how a sense of togetherness were originated at an early age in the twins. She writes:

“In those amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no End, and Everything was for Ever, Esthappan and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me and separately, individually as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with given identities” (Roy 2)

Rahel remembers the strange circumstances of their birth in a hospital in the city of Shillong in a very precarious condition. The car they were travelling broke down and they got into a crowded state road transport bus. According to Estha, if they had been born on the bus, they would have got free bus rides for the rest of their lives:

“It wasn’t clear from where he ‘d go this information from, or how he know these things, but for years the twins harbors a faint resentment against their parents for having diddled them out of a life time of free bus rides.”(4)

The twins had so many ridiculous assumptions. The children believed that if they were killed in a zebra crossing, the government would pay for their funerals. They later connect it with the death of Sophie Mol and opine that since she did not die in a zebra crossing the government did not pay for her funerals. The childish interpretations, when viewed later in life become a memory to relish.

When Rahel looks at the blue colour on the high dome of the newly painted church, she wonders how someone must have taken the paint so high and how he had supported merely on a piece of rope and what might have happened to the person if the supporting rope had broken down!

Roy feels nostalgic when she analyses how children’s imagination has no sense of propriety, when it should or should not indulge in its playful activities and as such can transform the sombre

atmosphere into cosmic and the comic into sombre.(Srivastava 114)

Roy is reminiscent of Rahels and Estha’s mischievous, playful and funny activities in which they remain gleefully employed. Rahel was blacklisted in the Nazareth Convent School because she has decorated a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers outside her headmaster’s garden gate. She was expelled for setting fire for her Headmaster’s false hair bun, the reason being nothing more than to satisfy her child like enquiries.

The mischievous activities that the children engage in are not the noisy and violent ones but the silent ones, where no words are spoken but the agile minds of the children remain active, their eyes dance to the tune of their intentions while no significant activity is visible to the outsiders.

The novelist also delights in the memory of the time they spend with Sophie Mol who is no more. On coming to India Sophie Mol too joined their mischievous activities. Estha, Rahel and Sophie Mol act as Mrs.Pillai, Mrs.Eapen and Mrs. Rajagopalan. They wore saris which were old ones and torn in half. Estha pleated Sophie Mol’s pleat, organized Rahels pallu and settled his own. After placing red bindis on their foreheads they looked “like three raccoons trying to pass off as Hindu ladies.” (189)

The children play with words which is usually a favourite game of those with flair in language. Estha and Rahel marvel over words, play with them, toss them around and flex their mental muscles to find the meanings of words as well as their backgrounds in order to satisfy their own anxieties or to impress other children by their knowledge. (Srivastava 116)

The playing with unfamiliar long words seems so interesting. The word ‘locusstandi’ for Estha and Rahel becomes “locusts stand l”. The duo also tries to impose the literal meaning for many words, In the Hotel Sea Queen, Rahel and Estha finds the bell boy who took them up to their room was neither a boy nor had a bell.

When Miss. Mitter gives Estha and Rahel a book titled “The Adventures of Susie Squirrel” as a

gift, they read its title forward and then backward "ehT serutnevda fo eisuS lerriuqS"(Roy 60).

As a punishment for this crime of reading backwards they had to write "In future we will not read backwards" (60) a hundred times. The children find a hidden justice in the killing of Miss.Milten by a milk van which was going backward. They associated it with the punishment she gave them.

Tapan kumar Ghosh writes:" It is a breath taking evocation of childhood echoed in the silly word-play, the reading backward habit of the twins, the soft-slurring patterns of word sound that produces an incantatory effect, the splitting up and occasional distortion of words to express the exact mood conveyed by the word to the child's mind, and the meaningless private vocabulary that gives new shapes to names and words."(223)

The novelist also remembers how Baby Kochamma was so strict and she imposed penalty and deducted them from their pocket money. She strongly advised Estha and Rahel to speak in English in order to create a good impression in Sophie Mol when she arrives from London to spend Christmas at Ayemenem.

Another mischievous activity of the children is calling each other nicknames. While fighting with each other, Estha calls Rahel a 'refugee stick insect', where as she calls him 'Elvis the Pelvis'. Other references to Estha are 'Popeye the sailor man' (99) 'Estha Mon' (24) 'Estha alone' (96), 'Little man' (100) and 'Quitass' (327). Roy gives so many names to Estha to show her intense fondness for him. She also wanted to raise him to the level of an epic character for which various epithets are often used in the epic tradition.

Estha and Rahel remember how on one occasion they were pushed around a room by Ammu to Baba, then to Ammu, and then again Baba "like billiard balls." While pushing Estha away, Ammu had said to Baba, "Here you keep one of them. I can't look after them both" (84).

The experience which Estha had with the orange drink Lemon drink Man turns him into an introvert. Probably such an experience has its basis in Arundhati Roy's own experience as she tells

Urvashi Butalia in Outlook, April 9, 1997 - "My brother Lalith is in many ways the most privileged reader of the book because we have shared a childhood, blew spit bubbles together, misunderstood the adult world together."

The memories of the twin-children and their longing for each other are heart-throbbing. The novelist also portrays how childhood has a great impact on the character of an individual. She also insists how the adults through their acts of hypocrisies and egoisms world captivate the young souls. Estha and Rahel love each other so intensely that the very idea of separate identities is alien to them, but their Cousin Sophie mol's death separate them forcibly. Their father Baba goes abroad, sending a half-insane Estha back to Ayemenem, while their mother Ammu dies. The incestuous relationship they had fails to give them the desired happiness even though Estha finds in Rahel both a sister and lost mother.

Rahel's visit to the USA and her marriage with an American- Larry Mc Casin fails to give her lasting happiness and ends in divorce. Rahel comes back to India to live with a now somewhat insane, Estha.

Ramesh K.Srivastava says, "The world continues as it were in a makeshift refugee camp. Each person comes, stays there for a brief duration, tells the story of a natural or man-made disaster and departs."(108)

The Ayemenem house with its full glorious name and its odd values collapses. In this once – glorious Ayemenem house, what finds place is filth in every nook and corner. The decay of the house is reflected in its inhabitants. But it is the Ayemenem house itself and its hypocritical value –system which are responsible for the tragedy of the inhabitants. Arundhati Roy writes so aptly about it:

"It was a grand old house, the Ayemenem House but aloof-looking. As though it had little to do with the people that lived in it. Like an old man with rheumy eyes watching children play, seeing only transience in their shrill elation and their whole-hearted commitment to life."(Roy 165)

The next major aspect that adds to the element of nostalgia in the novel is the humour in the world of the children. Tom Hiney in the July 5, 1997 issue of *The Spectator* recommends the book to the readers calling it 'extremely funny and enchanting and pretty much a genius piece of debut fiction.' There are many factors which give rise to this genial vein, though the funny activities of Rahel and Estha provide a bulk of it.

Chacko, a Rhodes at Oxford has some of his excesses and eccentricities. His mother claims that he was made of the 'prime ministerial material' to which Ammu always responded, Ha! Ha! Ha! Like people in the comics. (Roy 56)

Chacko claims to be writing a family biography for which the family would have to pay him 'not to publish' implying thereby his threat of biographical blackmail, but to which Ammu gives an appropriate reply that he himself was a 'fit ease' for that. Chacko too shows sometimes his sense of humour. In response to Baby Kochamma's remark that the Hindus have no sense of privacy, he sarcastically says

"They have horns and scaly skins. And I've heard that their babies hatch from eggs.'(86)

Roy nostalgically remembers her grandfather and represents him as Pappachi. Pappachi, like Chacko is a westernized Indian, who considers himself taller than others and nurtures irrational grievances against others including his own wife.

"Until the day he died, even in the stifling Ayemenem heat, every single day, Pappachi wore a well-pressed three piece suit and his gold pocket watch. On his dressing table next to his cologne and silver hair brush, he kept a picture of himself as a young man, with his hair ,slicked down, taken in a photographer's studio in Vienna."(49)

The childhood innocence and the anguish of the children to know about the world are brought out by Roy in a witty way. After the funeral of Pappachi, Mammachi asked Rahel to help her locate and remove her contact lenses with the little pipette

that came in its own case. Rahel asked Mammachi whether, after Mammachi died, she could inherit the pipette. Ammu took her out of the room and smack her. She said:

"I never want to hear you discussing people's death with them again."(55)

Another significant source of Arundhati Roy's humour is associated with the funny activities of the children. Estha imitating Caesars dying words "Et, tu? Brute?" then fall Caesar" falls on bed. Kochu Maria feels angry and tells him to break the bed in his father's house. Estha would then rise from the dead, stand on his bed and say, "Et tu? Kochu Maria? Then fall Estha!" posing to die again. Kochu Maria believes "Et tu "to be an obscenity of something insulting in English like "Kochu Maria, you young ugly black dwarf" (171) and waits for an appropriate opportunity to complain against Estha to Mammachi.

In Abhilash talkies, Rahel fails to sit properly on the folding chair which, because of Rahel's light weight:

".... folded her into itself like sandwich stuffing and she watched from between her knees". (99)

At the airport, Estha and Rahel see a Kangaroo shaped garbage bin and the sign saying:

"Welcome to the Spice Coast of India" but which the children read backwards. Rahel visualizes the airport garbage bins with the help of her imagination as if they were living creatures. The smallest bin "stretched its neck like people in English films that loosen their ties after office." The middle bin "rummaged in her pouch for a long cigarette stub to smock" and finding an old cashew nut in a plastic bag "gnawed it with her front teeth like a rodent" (139)

Ammu orders the children to behave well in public and threatens otherwise to send them away where "you will jolly well learn to behave." Rahel gives her own interpretation to the expression jolly well by saying:

"Jolly well was a deeply well with larfing dead people in it."(148)

Since Estha and Rahel were to behave as ambassadors of the country before Sophie Mol, ambassador Estha and ambassador Rahel walk towards her and indulge in the following conversation

"Where d'you think people are send to jolly well behave?" Estha and Rahel in a whisper

"To the government" Rahel whispered back, because she knew.

"How do you do?" Estha said to Sophie Mol loud enough for Ammu to hear.

"Just like a laddoo one pice two," Sophie Mol whispered to Estha. She had learned this in school from a Pakistani classmate. (150)

Similarly, when Rahel asks for her punishment for not behaving properly at the airport, Baby Kochamma says "some things come with their own punishments," on which Rahel begins to think:

"Some things come with their own punishments. Like bed-rooms with built-in cupboards. They would all learn more about punishments soon. That they came in different sizes. That somewhere so big they were like cupboards with built-in bed-rooms. You could spend your whole life in them wandering through dark shelving. (115)

ow where Estha's words had been. He couldn't be expected to understand that. (19-20)

Even the small day-to-day happening reminds the characters in the novel a sense of nostalgia. When Rahel blows spit bubbles, it reminds Ammu of her ex-husband Baba's unrefined behavior. The capital 'M' in 'Memories' show us just how serious of a matter this is to Estha.

Almost any object, sensation, smell, or sight is capable of bringing nostalgic sensations. Rahel in most situations try to capture it. This is an instance in which memories are to be treasured not feared:

"The torch-man opened the heavy Princess circle door into the fan- whirring, peanut-crunching darkness. It smelled of breathing people and hair oil. And old carpets' magical, sound of music smell that Rahel remembered and treasured. Smells, like music, hold memories. She breathes deep and bottled up for posterity."(98-99)

There are also some untold nostalgic references in the novel. Though it is the first time Rahel sees Comrade Pillai since returning to Ayemenem. The readers get the idea that there is some some experience in the past both of them share and remember but neither of them is willing to discuss.

"Neither question nor answer was meant as anything more than a polite preamble to conversation. Both knew that there are things that can be forgotten and things that cannot-that's sit on shelves like stuffed birds with balful, sideways-starring eyes."(128-29)

The most heart-touching nostalgic reference is a sad flashback moment reminiscent of their mother. Even though Ammu changes significantly in the several years before her death, Rahel remembers the Ammu of her childhood as she watches her mother's body being dumped into the incinerator. She remembers Ammu as she and Estha know her: the one who loved them ceaselessly, who inhabited the brightest memories and the happiest time s of their lives.

The novel also shows how the simplest little details have the power to trigger overwhelming memories. At thirty one, Rahel has grown to look strikingly like Ammu the last time Estha saw her:

"Their beautiful mother's mouth, Estha thought. Ammu's mouth. That had kissed his hand through the barred train window. First class, on the Madras mail to Madras. Bye Estha, God bless', Ammus mouth had said. Ammu s trying-not-to-cry mouth. The last time he had seen her."(300)

Memories are what that construct the whole of the novel. It talks about the past life of Ammu and Baba in Shillong, how the twins were

born. Return of Ammu to Ayemenem after her divorce. The death of Sophie Mol seems to be ever living memory. Though she is dead the book has frequent references to her. The love life of Father Mulligan and Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Velutha are portrayed very nostalgically. In the process of the narrative there is a previously suppressed painful memory, which ruins the life of Rahel and Estha.

Rahel and Estha and everyone in the Ayemenem house longs for the good old days. The fun they had in love and the life they lived together lingered in the minds of the characters forever in the novel. Arundhati Roy portrays the nostalgic memories of almost all the characters, irrelevant of their significance in the novel.

To sum up, Arundhati Roy is an extraordinary novelist in the realm of English novel. Amar Nath Prasad says that "her maiden novel, *The God of Small Things*, has now attained a great novel of the world. The novel transcends the limits of human predicament and creates a universal story of dignity of love in the midst of tragedy. It is out of this tragic grandeur that Arundhati Roy has woven her novel.

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