



## ART AND SENSIBILITY IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

*The God of Small Things* is the only novel written by one of the great contemporary writer and activist Arundhati Roy. Generally, it is considered as a masterpiece in terms of the technique used in it. On the contrary, this paper endeavors to judge the glitches left by Roy in her artistic process and her sensibility.

**Key Words:** Art, artistic process, fiction, sensibility, probing, technique.

Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* won Booker Prize in 1997, since then it has been a widely known and read book. It even got 5389 reviews. It appeared in the world as a technically brilliant product. It is acclaimed as a work of art which sees beneath the surface realities and presents them in a bold unconventional style. The best way to study Arundhati Roy's art and sensibility is to view it in context of intensity of modernist art. Modernist art, we must understand, by its very nature is revolutionary. Breaking with the past tradition, it has adjusted intellectually. The content and form have taken a sudden turn in which plot,

action, coherence, time, space all are ignored. Ideas and words are twisted. The form is violently wrenched and stretched into strange shape, so that manifold and different aspects of life are examined. Then, there is a delicate sensibility to the impressions of life. The advantage of this method is that the artist first clarifies to himself his own impressions of life, and then shapes them intuitively into a whole, even if he has to make use of any technique like expressionism, impressionism, realism, magic-realism, surrealism, naturalism, psycho-analysis, the stream of consciousness.

In this context we will focus on Arundhati Roy's artistic sensibility to contemporary impression or basic social assumptions, the issues she raises in her novel – to see how she responds to them through a technique seen as innovatory in the Indian literary field. Her approach to art, we know, is inherently related to characteristic modernist feeling, the contemporary feeling that we live in totally novel times. The feeling is consciousness, a felt condition of human mind, a condition which Miss Roy explores, feels through, and even reacts against it. We can say that new consciousness or sensibility is, therefore, crucially tied up with the definition of her contemporary situation and her art.

In any definition of social reality through modernist consciousness, we have to see the quality of abstraction which will take us behind the familiar social surface. This involves breaking away from the familiar functions of language and conventions of form. This gives us initial shock - the shock of violation of expected continuities. Art then turns from realism towards technique and spatial form in pursuit of deeper penetration of life. The task of art becomes its self-realization outside and beyond established order. The artist can move beyond necessity to the area of enlightenment. This is what exactly Arundhati Roy seeks to do, freely without any restriction with the social issues of the day and basic human compulsions.

The logical corollary is that social issues Roy examines are inextricably woven into her technique or form. Her form is not manageable rather it is a conscious mannerism she adopts to explore a prevailing social phenomenon. How successfully she explores and initiates the quality of her experience is the subject of this paper.

Before taking up this question we may do well to remember that Miss Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a major breakthrough in Indian fiction, especially in Indian setting – the depiction of engaging tale of cross caste forbidden love between a Paravan boy and a high caste Christian girl. It has been treated on naturalistic ground to establish the eternal state of love against the Indian social scenario. It is a modernist tendency to suggest that "the truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality to define what is 'real'. In this rupture, which is the achievement of aesthetic form,

the factious world appears as true reality" (Falack 113). In fact, the fiction is the effective means which can deliver the truth behind the world we live in. D.H. Lawrence believes that the novel "can inform and lead into new places and flow of our sympathetic consciousness, and it can lead our sympathy away in recoil from things dead" (Falack114). True art, therefore, signifies its power to imaginatively make a foray into hitherto unknown dimensions of reality. Roy's technical innovations of modernism and linguistic deviation, we may understand, are but a tool to fathom the deeper meaning behind the superficial framework.

In the light of definition of art discussed we may take up the question we have raised earlier, that is, how successfully Miss Roy explores the quality of her experience. To answer this question we may take two or three situations from the novel, and analyze them strictly in terms of her art. First we may consider her treatment of gender discrimination, which has been deeply rooted in Indian psyche since the hoary past. She probes this social phenomenon with all the technical tools at her disposal. With flashback technique she develops the theme of gender-bias, especially through the life and character of Ammu's brother Chako. He is painted in interesting hues as a self-centered person who cannot outwit Pillai as far as political maneuverings are concerned. He is one of those young people who talk about Marxism as a fashion. At Oxford where he goes after B.A. to do another degree, marries an English woman. And when the marriage breaks up, he comes back to Ayemennem penniless and aimless, to work for the mother's pickle factory where he exploits women workers who depend on him for their livelihood. The ladies of the house ignore his sexual escapades by calling them 'Men's Needs'. His mother Mammachi even has a special room to facilitate his 'needs' uninterrupted. Not only this, she slips money into the pocket of the girl he has used. And the same mother when it comes to her daughter, never bother about her daughter's 'needs' knowing fully well that Ammu has separated from her husband, and has been lonely. This is the patriarchal society Roy is hitting at and also hitting at the law that sustains it. She is not probing why a daughter like Ammu with two children to support is being ill

treated, humiliated and ignored in such family set up? Is she not going beneath the surface to see the reality? Perhaps, she is not, except moving along the surface using at the most sarcasm while describing the social and legal position of the family and its members. Let's have a look at Roy's art and sensibility by going to the text.

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chako, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers he always referred to it as 'my' factory, 'my' pineapples, 'my' pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu as a daughter had no claim to the property. Chako told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no Locust Stand I. "Thanks to our male chauvinist society", Ammu said. Chako said, "what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine"(Roy3).

This is the crucial stage in the novel where Arundhati could peep into the hard crust of gender-bias, but she did not do so. Nor does her often acclaimed technique comes to her aid. She is floating on the surface taking recourse to legal position and not diving to the bottom to see beneath the truth. She is wallowing smugly in the hollow irony "male chauvinist society". Ammu's response to Chako's assertion "what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" only generates sarcasm. By implication this is not the response of the author who does not know the answer, nor does she see beneath the surface of the 'realities'. Chako's assertion does not generate heat to take us to any area of enlightenment, which the art demands. Here Roy shows not strength, but weakness. Instead of facing the issue squarely, she relapses into irony.

She fails to penetrate the surface, and fails to see into the social assumptions and deep rooted practices. She lets the opportunity slip by and does not rise up to the occasion. Nor her technique stands by her. There is no sharpness in her sensibility, nor intensity in her art to handle this crucial situation. She has failed to contemplate the issue of gender discrimination dispassionately. Her failure is an artistic failure.

Roy's artistic failure is more or less like the failure of E.M. Forster in his novel *A Passage to India*. The novel seeks to probe the question of friendship between the English and the Indians. At one stage Aziz tells Fielding when they are riding together:

We [ Indian] may hate one another but we hate you most. If I don't make you( the English) go, Ahmed will, Karim will, if it is fifty or five hundred years we shall get rid of you, yes, we shall drive every blasted Englishmen into the sea... he rode against him furiously and he concluded, half kissing him "you and I shall be friends" "why cannot be friends now?" said the other, holding him affectionately "it is what I want . It is what you want". But the horses do not want they swerved apart; the earth did not want, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass"( Forster 306).

To the question raised by Fielding "why can't be friends now"(Forster 306) Forster has no answer, he looks away from the issue, does not face the issue squarely. He lets the chance slip away to probe the issue of friendship between the English and the Indian which is the *raison d'être* of his novel. Forster's response ends in "the horses don't want" which does not take beneath the surface, nor does it take us to the area of enlightenment. His sensibility does not grasp the depth of the issue which he has undertaken to probe. His art fails, and it is an artistic failure like that of Roy's in her novel.

Then the other issue, the most important one in *The God of Small Things* is the issue of caste discrimination brought out through the story of forbidden love between Ammu and the untouchable Velutha. In the last section of chapter 13 of the novel, on a December afternoon in the torrential rain Velutha's father, the old Paravan, Velley Paapan appears at Mammachi's kitchen door, a symbol of utterly crushed soul of untouchable, meek, submissive, cringing pathetic figure born only to serve higher caste and to suffer from them. Kochu Maria tries to shoo him away, but he won't go. He is worse than dog. Velley Paapan blubbers, cries and weeps, torn between locality and love, narrating to the two women what he had seen, what he saw every night. Ammu and his son making love on the bank of the river. The lovers sprang from his loins and hers. His son and her daughter. This was the real cyclonic disturbance in the house. It was too disgusting, Mammachi rose and pushed Velley roughly toppling him over the pouring rain, mud, slush. Baby Kochamma arrives and spits on the man

who is weeping and groveling. He is at the bottom of his personal respect. He offers to kill his son. The women abused him profusely, spouting their wrath and caste hatred on him.

Their anger now turns on Ammu "How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans"(Roy 257).

Mammachi's rage is redirected into a cold contempt for her daughter for what she had done.

She thought of her naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy coolie. She imagined it in vivid detail: a Parvan's coarse black hand on her breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her legs. The sound of their breathing. His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat. (Roy 257-58)

Roy further narrates that Mammachi's tolerance of 'Men's Needs' for her son becomes the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. "She has defiled generations of breeding - (The little blessed one, blessed personally by the Patriarch of Antioch, an imperial Entomologist a Rhodes Scholar) and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptism and birthday Parties they would nudge and whisper"(Roy 258).

On the other hand Velley Pappan's son has crossed the boundaries of the well known caste system. He had crossed the history laws and is socially unpardonable. He is willing to tear his son limb by limb. His thinking only betrays his suppressed self, distorted vision and crushed soul. It has been so with him, with every Paravan over the centuries, since the hoary past. This is the truth Roy penetrates, and brings out through the response of Mammachi and Paapan to the situation of crisis. We move into some area of enlightenment, but Roy develops this explosive situation by brushing aside the laws of probability and necessity while weakening her art. No doubt she has used her descriptive power on the episode, but the presentation is not evolved, but seems manipulated through her technique, through the criss-cross framework of narrative, one cannot chop down credibility. There is nothing in the novel which

suggests that Ammu falls in love with Velutha except that his strong body and glistening back attracts her. Any man's strong body, for that matter, would attract woman's attention. This is secondary, the first thing is the character of Ammu. Convinced that her parents would do nothing to settle her, Ammu goes to Calcutta to her aunt's house on a pretext, marries on her own a Bengali gentleman who is Assistant Manager in a Tea Estate, without the permission of her parents. But her marriage runs into trouble when she finds that her husband is not just a heavy drinker but a full blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic deviousness and tragic charm. He beats her and his bouts of violence include children. She shows the same courage and dynamic nature as she leaves him with her children when he wants her to sleep with the boss of the Tea Estate for his promotional chances. This courageous and dynamic girl of 23 years old remains passive at her parents' house, taking mid-night swims, smoking cigarettes and listening to film songs on a transistor radio. The author narrates:

For herself she knew that there would be no more chances. There was only Ayemenem now. A front Veranda and a back veranda. A hot river and a pickle factory. (Roy 43)

The loneliness and the 'reckless rage of suicide bomber leads her to alone man by night and her children love him by day. The question how's that she has been indifferent to her children's future and indifferent to her own life at 23, and why does she receive ill-treatment from her mother, from her father and from her brother? We have seen that she had been courageous, dynamic and aggressive. Why didn't she look for a job, even for a husband? She has so suddenly turned passive, accepted her destiny in the front veranda or in the back veranda of Ayemenem house. Here Ammu's character is not kept in tune with her character shown in the earlier part of the novel. It seems that her present character is not a logical development of her earlier one. Here it seems that Roy is manipulating and keeping Ammu in the Ayemenem House to create the love-making scenes with untouchable Velutha, to show love-making between a higher caste with a lower caste boy will bring "cyclonic disturbance" not only in the house, but also in the society where the

Police and the communist leaders will also be involved to destroy the untouchable, Roy insists to show caste discrimination on laws of probability. Here her art and sensibility both suffers though her descriptive power and narrative pace are at their best.

The basic tenet of art requires the full blooded intuitive response to the issues a writer raises in his work, to reach the rock-bottom truth. His choice of innovatory technique and style is only meant to facilitate his quest for truth. Expressionism, impressionism, realism, magic-realism, naturalism, stream of consciousness all are different techniques to explore and evaluate the writer's experience. The success of art depends on the depth and intensity of penetration of surface realities. If he fails to get behind the surface, or contemplate the experience dispassionately, his art fails. Roy has not been able to penetrate deeply into the issues of gender discrimination and caste discrimination, though she has been able to dramatise them effectively.

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