

Comparative Study of the Autobiographical Element in *'God of Small Things'* and *'The Inheritance of Loss'*.

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the autofiction techniques or the merging of autobiographical and fictive elements in Arundhati Roy's booker novel 'God of Small Things' and Kiran Desai's booker novel 'The Inheritance of Loss'. Each novelist has a different story to tell and is different in style and treatment of themes, but what is curious is that each has strong autobiographical undercurrents. The novelists spin their tales on people they have known, places they have been and experiences they have had.

Key Words:

Autofiction, Autobiographical, undercurrents, fictive elements.

This worldwide acclaim of Roy's *The God of Small Things* leaves no room for any doubt about the immense popularity of the book. Nearly one million copies of this modern classic have already been sold out and many more are in the waiting so as to make this exceptionally local novel a Universal best seller. The book took the publishing world by storm and shot the newspaper headlines in such a way that the media became almost hysterical in highlighting the commercial success of the book. No writer had been paid such a fabulous amount (Half a million pounds, roughly rupees three crores) for the publishing rights of his / her first novel. "Two months before, she had wondered what she was going to do. Now she had just made half-a-million pounds.

It is probably the first Indian English book, said Madhumalati Adhikari, that has been praised in different ways, for the novel has a rich and varied texture leading to multiple approaches and interpretations, and thus meaning more than meets the eye or the ear. Heard melodies are sweet but those that are less heard or partially heard are said to be sweeter. It is for the latter that the novel lingers long in the memory. What interests most are the suggestions, half-apprehensions, or what Rajgopal Nidamboo calls, 'The Echoes'. Roy herself said, "It tells a different story from the story the book is telling you. The book is not about what happened but about how what happened affected people."

One careful reading of the novel gives us the impression that the theme of the novel is quite simple but as we scratch a little deeper and read between the lines, we find that the whole thing is a well-planned work.

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According to Colin Wilson, "It is a novel of total perception which Roy builds with hundreds of unconnected fragments and impressions." In simple words it is a subtle and complex theme, composed of memoirs treated artistically by the author. The story which is simple and tragic,

...encapsulates the doomed love of a high-caste Syrian Christian, Ammu, for a low-caste untouchable, Velutha. The story is set in the orthodox and conservative town of Ayemenem near Kottayam beside the Meenachariver. What makes this story complex is the impact this tragic interlude . . . made on the central protagonists of the story - Anllilu's children, a pair of dizygotic twins - a boy and a girl, Esthappen and Rahel - who were just seven years old when the trauma of their life began. The tale achieves its climax in the death by drowning of the almost nine-year old Sophie Mol, the only daughter of their divorced } maternal Uncle, Chacko, in the Meenachal river Sophie Mol's death is offset by the simultaneous discovery of Ammu's love affair with Velutha. What follows is Velutha's brutal death at the hands of the police, Ammu's lonely exile and consequent death in a hotel room at the age of thirty one, and the separation of twins. The whole is overlaid by a stifling atmosphere of malice, betrayal and decadence. (Rama Nair)

Since Roy was an architect like Thomas Hardy using her architectonic skill, not in architect but in literature, she designs her plot well in keeping with the themes. She herself wrote, ". . . the only way I wrote it was the way an architect designs a building . . ." This therefore leads to the fact that the whole thing, though diversified, swinging both backwards and forwards, and composed of several strings, is unified, compact, well-knit, well-built and one that possesses unique unity in diversity. Plot, said Somerset Maugham, is a sequence of events in their causal relationship and that is what we find in Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

The setting of the novel, its characters, its social and political background etc. laid emphasis on the utility of small things, small dreams in life and thus supports the theme. "These small things don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in or the smell of your lover's skin." (Roy, 229). As long as the *God of Small Things* was in the lives of people, they had dreams, hopes and smiles. But the moment he was gone, life crumbled and fell down like a house of cards. The novel perhaps seems to justify the Biblical statement, "For whom bath despised the day of small things?" Nobody. Arundhati Roy thus celebrates smallness because small things make up the sum of life better.

The tragic heroine of the novel was the most conspicuous representative of the fourth generation who died very young at the age of thirty one - "not old, not young - but a viable dieable age." (Roy, 161). She -became a victim of a male dominated patriarchal society. Her frustration arising out of sudden disruption of education, uncongenial atmosphere at home, and no suitable marriage proposal made her life dull and desperate. Then again her chance meeting with an unknown man at Calcutta, her subsequent marriage and failure and unwelcome return to her parents made her life very sad, almost a stand still where there was nothing to hope for. She knew that she was "already damned . . . an unmixable mix." Living in her parental house she felt that she had no 'Locusts Stand" (Roy, 159) Life had been lived for her and at twenty four she became virtually

untouchable in her home, in her family and in the society. As a divorced daughter, said Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere. Her two twins (Rahel and I Estha) were infact the two millstones round her neck. Then her meeting with Velutha, which proved fatal and disastrous, turned out to be the beginning of the end. She had to leave and die helpless, sick, alone in a hotel, "in the strange bed, in the strange room, in the strange town." (Roy, 161). She was humiliated and cornered by her father, ill-treated and betrayed by her husband, insulted by the police and rendered destitute by her brother. She failed to find a place as daughter, as wife, as sister and as citizen. She eventually paid a very heavy price for her non-conformity and defiance. Roy .seems to uphold the view that our society frowns on lovers be it Romeo and Juliet, Laila and Majnu, Shrin and Farhad or Ammu and Velutha.

Ammu, like all other characters of the novel she too suffered, and unfortunately suffered most. Her suffering started at a very young age and followed her like a shadow up to the last. Ammu's father thought her college education as a luxury and an unnecessary expense and so she had to idle away her time at Ayemenem. In the absence of a good marriage proposal, Ammu's life became unbearable burden and she thought of escaping from Ayemenem, from her ill-tempered father and bitter long suffering mother. She was sent to live with a distant aunt at Calcutta. It was there that she met her future husband but very soon she realized that she was married to a wrong person - alcoholic, exhausted and a spent force. If getting married was a problem, married life became a greater problem. And when Mr. Hollick wanted her "to be looked after" (Roy, 42) by him at his bungalow she became impatient and had, no option but to return to her parents in Ayemenem. "To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams? But also greater misery awaited her at Ayemenem for her and her children. As ill luck would have it, she was drawn towards Velutha - the well built Velutha created ripples in her :

On days like this there was something restless and curtained about her Even her walk changed from a safe-mother walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes. She spoke to no one. She-spent hours on the river bank with her plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine... (Roy, 44)

All art is interpretation and Roy's novel has been interpreted severally. One of the interpretations reveals the fact that the novel is by and large an autobiographical type of novel. The story of the novel resembles Roy's personal life in several ways. The character of Ammu represents Mrs. Mary Roy, Arundhati's mother. Mary Roy's marriage with a Bengali husband her separation from her husband, her escape from the house to save herself from the boredom but return to the same place as an unwelcome guest etc. resemble the events of Anunu's life. Further there is a marked similarity between Arundhati Roy and Rahel regarding their early struggle, and hardships. The autobiographical touches are thus definitely traced in the setting of the novel and the characters of Ammu and Rahel. According to K.V. Surendran it is difficult to look at the novel keeping away the turmoil that the novelist and her mother Mary Roy have undergone in their lives.

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This is how we see that the novel has a large number of thematic variations. Several themes and issues have been very competently wrapped into one compact whole. This diversity in unity reminds me of what Lord Macaulay said in respect of Bacon's essays, "Fold them they looked like a toy in the hand of a Japanese lady; unfold them, the huge armies of Sultan could rest under them." The novelist has hit many birds with one stone. This immense variety in respect of themes thus becomes a marked feature of the novel.

Kiran Desai first appeared on the literary stage and caught the readers' attention in 1997 when she got herself published in the *New Yorker* and in *Mirror Work*, an anthology of fifty years of Indian writing which was edited by Salman Rushdie. *Strange happenings in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai was the closing piece. Then she had taken two years' off to write her debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. Finally *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* got published in 1998 after the hard work of four years. *Hullabaloo* earned applause for Kiran and Rushdie's comment is worth noticing when he wrote about it- "Lush and intensely imagined. Welcome proof that India's encounter with the English Language continues to give birth to new children, endowed with lavish gifts." Kiran Desai's remark about the book is equally interesting, "I think my first book was filled with all that I loved most about India and knew I was in the inevitable process of losing. It was also very much a book that came from the happiness of realizing how much I loved to write." The publication of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* made her famous as a writer and many eyes turned towards her.

After the success of her first novel, which was a light comedy, she moved on to a rather serious plot and started working on her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. She worked on this novel for many years and when it was finally published, it was short listed for the prestigious Man Booker Award and leaving others behind she got the most coveted Man Booker Award. While talking about the theme and characters in *The Inheritance of Loss*, she says:

The characters of my story are entirely fictional, but these journeys (of her grandparents) as well as my own provided insight into what it means to travel between East and West and it is this I wanted to capture. The fact that I live this particular life is no accident. It was my inheritance. ("Kiran Desai Biography")

Kiran Desai is greatly attached to her mother Anita Desai, the famous Indian English novelist, and is highly influenced by her. She says about her mother; "I really completely adore her, I see her face and I completely melt. It's an amazingly close relationship, and usually I talk to her every single day." She said in her acceptance speech, "To my mother I owe a debt so profound and so great that this book feels as much hers as it does mine." She fulfilled her mother's dream in an extraordinary way, by winning the prestigious Man Booker Award, for which her mother had been short listed thrice but couldn't achieve it. With this, she became the youngest woman ever to receive this award.

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The book that made her renowned literary personality is set in the late 1980s, the time when Kiran went to America with her mother for the first time. When she wrote the novel, she chose Kalimpong as the background as she had already lived there and could describe it authentically as she had been a witness to life there.

The Inheritance of Loss is set up in post colonial India and also provides us the glimpses of colonial India. It deals with different aspects of the society-one of them being the Marginality. Be it the colonial or the post colonial India, be it East or West, marginality has its own root in every society. Marginalized were there before Independence, they are there even after the British have left India, they are there in India as well as abroad.

The novel highlights a tussle between the two groups, the rich and powerful and the weak and poor. The rich and powerful seem to exploit the weak and the vulnerable sections of the society. The Judge, Lola and Noni represent the rich class who enjoy all the comforts and luxuries even in the post colonial India. Marginalisation has been an important aspect of diasporic consciousness as well and one finds many characters in the novel who lead a life of marginalized. The Indians have always felt marginalized in Western countries. Biju, who goes to USA in search of a respectable job, is forced to lead a life of poverty and insecurity. Achootan, a co-worker of Biju remarks about USA:

But at least this country is better than England, "he said 'At least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street, "Go back to where you came from". (The Inheritance of Loss, 134-135)

In this context, an article reported in The Hindu (Chennai ed.) dated 20.01.07 under the caption "I also faced racist bullying" on page 13 where Desai says, "I certainly have been walking the streets of London and elsewhere in England and people have said, "Go back to where you come from 'or you know, 'you damned Paki' ". She further says, "I don't know a single Indian to whom it has not happened. Anyone dark-skinned, basically from another part of the world faces this in the West.....That's how racism operates and that is how they get you it destroys your confidence and your dignity immediately."

Biju, who belongs to the marginalized group migrates to America in search of wealth and respect which he finds difficult to achieve in his own country. His dreams are all shattered when he finds that the same problems accompany him even in the foreign land and they seem to multiply gradually.

Biju and the likes face the same problem who migrate to the western world looking out for a better tomorrow and the truth dawns on them and they realise that their condition grows worse there instead of being better.

We see such less fortunate people in the novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai. There are a nameless cook called the cook serving in a retired Judge's house in India and his only son Biju, an immigrant in America without an address of his own, being marginalized and humiliated. (D Gnansekaran)

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The novel deals with double back ground setting simultaneously- the New York City of America which has innumerable legal and illegal immigrants from many third world countries, and Kalimpong, a small town of India which is at the foothills of Mt. Kanchenjunga in the Northeastern Himalayas, which is disturbed due to the political turmoil which is a result of the Liberation Movement launched by Gorkhas under the banner of GNLF. With the help of this double setting, Desai deals with the state of homelessness, exile, displacement and lack of belongingness which is experienced by illegal and legal diaspora communities not only in America (Foreign land) but it is also faced by the people of different states, regions and communities from India who are living in Kalimpong. The description of the people and the pain of exile, being uprooted and the ambition for a better life is very skillfully portrayed by Kiran Desai through frequent shifts in description from the first world to the third World countries . Through different characters and their voice, she presents a variety of experiences in various situations in India as well as USA, and analyzes the issues of home, homeland, diaspora and belongingness.

People who migrate to other lands, probably in the quest for a better tomorrow are torn apart by the circumstances because they try to belong but are unable to belong as their ties with their homeland keep on tugging at them and they live in a new land physically and materially while their hearts and spirits soar in homeland, thus leaving them scattered and incomplete.

The novel presents a view of the mental struggle of the characters that are always under the constant fear of being deported after the raids of the Immigration Authorities as they are the illegal immigrants, living in a foreign land without proper papers. They reach these foreign lands, leaving their homes and homelands because of craze and compulsions of various kinds in search of better job prospects and a dream to create a home away from home, a desire to get hold of a Green card anyhow; by marrying even the ugly, disabled or mentally retarded green card holders. They lead a life which is unreal, with the feeling of being in a better position outwardly but their inner self feels suffocated at the pangs of missing their home and homeland. People even after leaving their homeland cannot be detached as they carry things which remind them of their origin such as 'gold strung Kolhapuri slippers', 'a chunky Ganesh brought all the way from home despite its weight, for interior decoration plus luck in money and exams'. (*The Inheritance of Loss* , 49)

One also comes across Muslims who preserve 'nicely jacketed Qurans and cuckoo clock watches waking them in the morning with the Kamlā of "Allah hoooo Akbar". They leave their homelands with a dream of a better life elsewhere but they are not able to detach themselves from home and homeland. They dream of their visit to their homeland and relatives and friends and then to return with new happy memories. But the illegal immigrants are not able to return although they miss their home and homeland, still they feel helpless as they cannot be reunited with their relatives and friends and die in alien lands with only the memories of their near and dear ones.

Kiran Desai, thus, exposes the loopholes of the process of globalization where the very fact is unveiled that the physical boundaries between the nations have collapsed only for a few blessed ones. The poverty stricken

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people of third world countries who visualize America as their future home are unable to secure a place there which they can call their own. These people suffer in their homeland as well as in the exile they have chosen for themselves. Although they are not openly turned out as they have accepted the condition of 'exile willingly', home remains a mirage for them forever.

Biju's yearning for the home and homeland seep in and gets deep-rooted with the passage of time. Unhappiness in new land nourishes the yearning and it remains with the person lifelong. The condition of exile brings about a change in Biju's behavior towards Muslims. Being in India he never imagines of being a friend to a Muslim as he had grown up bullying the Muslim boys by calling them, "Pigs; pigs, sons of pigs." But when he meets Saeed Saeed in Queen of Tarts Bakery, he feels good with him and starts admiring him as a companion. Biju is himself puzzled when he starts' liking Saeed Saeed and his confusion is very skillfully drawn by Desai:

Saeed was kind and he was not Paki; therefore he was Ok?

The cow was not an Indian cow: therefore it was not holy? Therefore he liked Muslims and hated only Pakis?

Therefore he liked Saeed but hated the general lot of Muslims? Therefore he liked Muslims and Pakis and India should see it was all wrong and Handover Kashmir?

No, no, how could that be and----

This was but a small portion of the dilemma. He remembered what they said about black people at home. (*The Inheritance of Loss*, 76)

Through Biju's thought process, Desai describes how exile brings the dilemma in regard to racial discrimination. Biju had heard in his village in India that the Indians are far advanced than the Hubshis, the black ones, who "In their own country they live like monkeys in the trees. They come to India and become men."(*The Inheritance of Loss*, 115)

The thought process acquired by Biju is the colonial legacy. The white colonizers found Indians black as they were dark skinned in comparison to them while the Indians were gratified looking at the darker Africans and found themselves better as they were only brown and not black. Biju used to think in this way before he left for America. But his stay in America brings about a great change in his point of view of looking at others as racial discrimination is replaced by financial discrimination in exiled condition.

The novel starts with the description of insurgency in Kalimpong where the Nepalese demand their own state during the eighties. The people who have settled in Kalimpong with an idea of a serene and peaceful life in the lap of nature are shaken badly and they face the exiled condition in their own homeland where they considered themselves to be safe from all dangers.

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Desai observes life very keenly and nothing is hidden from her eagle eyes. She describes in the novel, the way in which innocent people suffer at the hands of police. The leaders who are the real culprits behind the insurgency just provoke the crowd and remain safe while the innocent workers who move with the call of the leaders, in whom they have full faith, are brutally killed by the police. The description of the rally and its aftermath unveils the real face of the leaders and their movements. On 27th July, 1986, a big rally is arranged in Kalimpong by the GNLF men. During the rally the crowd is suddenly hit by stones and nobody knows the real culprit behind this ill act:

The judge, the cook, Biju, Sai, Gyan, Uncle Potty, Lola and Noni, almost all the characters migrate from their native land with a desire to lead a better life but they have to suffer in the new land of their hopes and at the end they are left with a feeling of complete loss.

This is how these Indian women novelists have tried their best to free the female mentality from age long entirely sapless, hypocritical and insensitive male domination and create individual awareness in political, social, cultural and other walks of life, so that partial and step-motherly treatment given to women should come to an end. They have thus done their best to free the female sex and herald a new consciousness in them. If this tireless effort on the part of women for the sake of women goes on, the day is not very far when women shall be honorably equated with men in each and every field of life. What we urgently need today is "reciprocal and friendly relation between both the sexes — a relation which must be tinged with the colour of both modernity and conventionality, antiquity and spirituality."¹

Each novelist has a different story to tell and the novels are very different in style and treatment of themes, but what is curious is that each has strong autobiographical undercurrents. Several thematic concerns are also common, being universal in nature and concerning humanistic values. Each work is rich in terms literary merit, particularly the themes. Winning a Booker therefore was perhaps inevitable.

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