

Themes and Motifs in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores some of the themes and motifs in The God of Small Things containing a plethora of themes. This article ventures the description of how the small things in life build up, translate into people's behavior and subsequently affect their lives. How untouchables suffered in the hands of caste Hindus and Christians? How people greatly suffer from sex taboos?

Key Words:

Small things, contemporary society, untouchability, sex taboos.

Roy's book explores a plethora of themes offering realistic perspectives on women, children, workers Dalits, and Nature. Her commitment to highlight the maladies that strike at the roots of these issues reveals a humanistic approach in the traditions of great writers like Shakespeare and Tolstoy without any acrimony towards the perpetrators. Though Arundhati Roy's novel is a socially committed work, it has all the usual elements like setting, plot, character, structure, style, atmosphere and theme in it. However, the thematic concerns are being taken up here. Set in Kerala which is internationally known as 'God's own land' for its beautiful landscape of greenery and backwaters, an author like Roy whose worldview encompasses nature, man and animal, she cannot remain blind to the man-made degradation to environment. Therefore all these are intertwined with the themes.

The title seems composed of two terms (a) The God and (b) Small Things and it is these two that get well defined in the novel. This riddled God, said M. Math Meitei, "is neither that benevolent God of creation nor is it the power that brings havoc to the lives of many characters." The word God refers to Velutha, an important character in the novel, for he is a carpenter, a creator of small things and in that sense God like. He was born on earth with a mission and having completed it, disappeared. He was human God, made of flesh and blood. He is repeatedly referred to as "The God of Loss"(Roy, 265, 290, 312) because his was a life of Loss. He left "No footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirror." However, he was a God of small things, concerned with small things in his love for Ammu,". . . for thirteen nights . . . they stuck to small things and these small things included, the ant-bites on each others' buttons, caterpillars, a pair of small fish, a minute spider etc."

Each time when they parted, they made a very small promise, "Tomorrow - Tomorrow"(Roy, 339). Velutha has been rightly termed as God, for he stands out as a very tall figure in the novel. He was never a coward. Even when he knew that his end was imminent, he, said K.V. Surendran, "continued to remain a Gandhian, an apostle of non-violence." He is an unparallel creation and undoubtedly rises to the stature of a Shakespearean hero. However M. Mani Meitei is of the opinion that "this hidden God is no other than the novelist herself as she was adept at dealing with small things". There are innumerable references to small things in the novel. In the very opening page of the novel Roy makes use of the word 'Small' when she says, ". . . small fish appear in the puddle."(Roy, 1). We again come across references to small things when Rahel remembers Estha's experiences at Abhilash Talkies and Estha's sandwiches on the Madras Mail, ". . . these are only the small things." (Roy, 3) This continues and we find such references throughout. The words God and Small things are repeated severally and the novelist seems to have her motives behind such repetitions.

The expression 'Small things' is infact, highly symbolic and suggestive. There is a play upon the word small. Things which look small are in fact great. The expression, "And the air was full of thoughts and things to say. But at times like these, only the small things are ever said. The big things lurk unsaid inside", is meaningful and full of wisdom. In due course of time small things become big things and vice versa. Little can become great and great little; trivial turns out to be serious and serious, trivial. All small things such as a hint of a torrential down pour, promise of abundance in nature, assurance in human eye, pleasure in the stolen glance of a lover and many more of this sort, are really great simply because they have faith, trust, a hope, a future dream and the like:

The God of Small Things has the power to sustain, to heal, to console. The ever-changing world is charged with uncertainty. An unknown fear lurks behind every being. One has big dreams and they keep inflating day by day. There is always a fear deep down in the hearts of men, which is constantly threatening the fulfillment of the big dreams. Many die with unrealized dreams embedded in their hearts. Many live with a heavy heart, frustrated by the non-fulfillment of their dreams. Only those who recognize the God of Small Things can find true happiness and contentment. After all, is happiness not the highest common factor of all the dreams that men weave about themselves? Arundhati Roy's novel is an eye-opener for today's over-ambitious; selfish and insecure mankind, irrespective of class, creed or colour. In this jet-age man can find solace and comfort only if he surrenders himself to the God of Small things.(AlkaSaxsena)

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 support 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. One of the five judges of the Booker Prize acknowledged, "Roy's achievement, and it is considerable, is never to forget about the small things in life : the insects and the flowers, wind and water, the out-cast and the despised. She deserved to win." (Jason Cowley). Rightly did Pramod K. Nayar write:

In Roy.... the small things do matter the big things are predicted on small things the small things, events and people undergo experiences which are, in terms of magnitude, large when one focuses sufficiently long and hard at small things, they look bigger.

For Roy fiction has thus always been "a means to connect the smallest to the biggest." (L.K.Sharma). Thus the novel, is more about the glorification of the trivial and insignificant things.

The second important theme of the novel is the theme of feminine suffering and exploitation. The novel deals with the woman's question or women's position in society, their typical role and their relationship with men. The novel *The God of Small Things* is pre-eminently a novel by a woman, about a woman, seen through the eyes of a woman. The novel presents three generations of women -

- (a) Baby Kochamma and Mammachi,
- (b) Ammu and Margaret Kochamma and,
- (c) Rahel.

All of them suffer differently and are unhappy in their own ways. The structure of society presented in the novel is patriarchal wherein man is the sole controller of the sexual, economic, political and physical power.

Among the first generation of women Baby Kochamma and Mammachi represent the generation that submits to the norms of patriarchy. As a young woman Baby Kochamma had renounced the material world and as an old one, she seemed to embrace it. Her love for Father Mulligan and subsequent frustration in love and the unspent force of repressed desire resulted in her growing narcissism and eventual sadism. Having been deprived of marriage, the summum bonum of a woman's life, she becomes a study in meanness and perversion that can result from unnatural self-repression and consequent frustration. To cut the long story short, her frustration in love and the lack of understanding of her parents made her a neurotic. We thus see her mostly living in the past than in the present. She finds life an absurd drama, a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying little and living in her foolish paradise, she goes on writing love letters even at the age of eighty. Her life was a crushing defeat, for fate was unkind and cruel to her.

Arundhati Roy has also taken an opportunity through the various underlying themes, of criticizing the high handedness and corruption prevalent in most of the government departments of those days. She criticizes the poor maintenance of the roads, especially during rainy season, and the unhygienic pits and potholes on the

highways. The Public Works Department as is always the case, was notorious for making money and neglecting their duty. A reference to Zebra Crossing and free funerals clearly speaks of the pitiable social condition. The author finds the crematorium, rotten and hopeless, a place where "Nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police custody dead were cremated, people who died with nobody to lie at the back of them and talk to them." (Roy, 162). The airport as good as a local bus depot, was no better, a very notorious place. The Electricity Board and Municipal Engineers were shirkers and very often indulged in Killing elephants to take possession of ivory.

The system of education has also come under severe criticism. Both Estha and Rahel suffered at the hands of the school authorities in their own way. The last but not the least was the Police Department wherein law protectors were the laws breakers. The way Inspector Thomas treated Ammu and Velutha, clearly speaks of the inhuman behaviour of the police people. The inspector called Ammu a Veshya and tapped her breast with a baton, as if he was choosing mangoes from the basket. The Kottayam police instead of being - polite, obedient, loyal, intelligent, courteous and efficient - POLICE, was rough, uncivil, brutal and dishonest. The police atrocity is at its worst in case of Velutha who was tortured to death without sufficient evidence.

Contemporary Society is further put to severe criticism and scrutiny with regard to several other social problems. Of these the dominant is Untouchability. Though there are minor references to untouchability in the novel yet one that becomes a major theme is represented by Velutha, the representative of the Untouchables. These untouchables suffered at the hands of caste Hindus and Christians. His relation with Ammu triggered the whole tragedy. His presence poses several questions before us. Can the higher-ups in society do all the damage to those who are in the lower strata of Society? Velutha is not a mere individual character but a representative of a group of people who have been traditionally ill-treated. All are born equal, made of same flesh and blood but as we grow, we grossly suffer from worldly distinctions of caste, creed and colour. Velutha and his tragedy is an eye-opener and a big slap on the face of our so called civilized, advanced and fashionable society. Even fifty years of independence have not changed the fate of the lower castes, for they are still looked down upon by the people of higher castes.

Another important theme that gets focused and highlighted in the novel is the problem of environment. The first reference to this comes in the opening chapter when we hear Estha talking about smell of shit, dead fish, pesticides etc. The novelist is critical of the pollution of river water, the foul smell, unhealthy surroundings, making life miserable for themselves and also for future generations. The impact of the flow of gulf money on the people of Kerala is also seen, totally changing the complexion of the houses and the life styles of people. The irony of the situation is that those who earned it lived unhappy lives whereas those who used it lived happily. The issue closely related to this is urbanization which is the net result of the flow of gulf money. This urbanization is clearly seen in all walks of life - installation of dish antenna on the roof of Ayemenem house, new plebes of furniture, posh hotels, reference to the use of high heels, puff sleeves, lipsticks and other modern comforts, expensive perfumes used by elderly women in Ayemenem house, pornographic magazines, renovation

of Kari Laipu's house, craze for learning English etc. Most of the characters seem victims of urbanization. In short villages have become towns and towns metropolis.

However, the growing urbanization led to cultural decadence. The conventional art such as Kathakali disappeared and was replaced by new style of dance and architecture. This cultural decadence is further seen in the attitude of people regarding marriage and sex - "Baby Kochamma loving father Mulligan, a priest with no success, Pappachi finding pleasure in beating his wife, Chacko indulging with number of women workers, Ammu narrowly escaping from the hands of the English Manager, Velutha having sexual relations with Ammu, Margaret Kochamma leaving the first husband and going for another, Rahel's failing in her marriage etc." All these indicate that the institution of marriage was falling down from the high graceful pedestal. The old order was gradually changing. The novel also hints at the marginalization of women. Pappachi thought that the college education for girls (Ammu) was an unnecessary expense. Kalyani addressed her husband Pillai with great respect whereas he called her 'edi' say 'Hey, you! — insultingly'. Married and divorced daughters had no place in their parents' house. Chacko enjoyed supreme position whereas Ammu had no place and no position in that "wonderful male chauvinist society". There were different set of rules for males and different for females. Roy also denounces the false and corrupt religion of priests with "... .dusty curly beards but gold ringed fingers . . ." (Roy, 42) Nazrath Convent has been painted as a notorious institution. The novelist criticizes the doubtful missionary work, monopoly of senior sisters, so called orthodoxy of Bishops, conservative attitude of Christianity in not allowing Ammu's body to be buried in the church cemetery and several other controversial unholy acts. Besides we also find references to social snobbery, unhealthy conditions in life, poor educational structure, alcoholism, violence and several other social evils.

However, people greatly suffered from sex taboos. Roy's society seems a sex starved one and a large number of characters in the novel are seen getting involved in sexual affairs which can be termed as unnatural and illegal. Sexuality thus becomes one of the important issues in the novel. Hollic, the Manager of the English Company, said to have been the father of several illegal children, reveals his sexual intentions when he suggests Ammu's husband to go on leave and send Ammu to his bungalow 'to be looked after'. Chacko was known for his sexual weakness, encouraged in the name of "Man's needs"? (Roy, 268). Whereas identical behaviour in a woman deserves punishment. Baby Kochamma has great desire to have sexual relations with Father Mulligan whereas Father Mulligan's infatuation for "the Kissable mouth and blazing coal black eyes of Kochamma", is no less marked. Even the nuns also expressed a desire for sex indirectly. Estha and Rahel had strange sexualities. And finally Velutha and Ammu had sexual relations which lasted for thirteen nights, though with disastrous consequences. Thus sex plays an important part in the novel. There is also one instance of homosexuality reported between Orange drink Lemon drink Man and Estha.

According to M.L. Pandit "the novel seems to be a work of childhood feelings - the sensitive perception of seven year old twins, an idea of how they look at life, how their imagination works and how they feel at the parting from their mother."

The God of Small Things besides other virtues, is also well recognized for the subtle art of characterization. The characters are drawn in such a way that they help in bringing forth the various themes. Roy's realization of her genius in respect of characterization is a positive virtue. She seems conscious of her Kerala range (her limited range) and has wisely chosen, like Jane Austen, to work in her two inches of ivory. Though the narrative moves both backward and forwards, taking us to distant past and far off places, covering a big canvas, yet Roy prefers to work in her limited range. Unlike Dickens who trespasses every now and then into a land which does not belong to him, Arundhati Roy prefers to stay in the area set by her. However, she has achieved something unlimited in this limited range and has worked wonders. It is here, that she invites comparison with Jane Austen.

Set in a small town in Kerala, *The God of Small Things* (a regional novel) is a story about one particular family, bringing to life the quiet sleepy village of Kerala, Ayemenem. The novel, said R.K. Dhawan, has great Kerala flavour. Now the characters are all set in this background. Since Roy is a part and parcel of this atmosphere and is said to have spent her formative years here, she successfully recreates a fascinating picture of the atmosphere in the novel. No good novel, said Henry James, "will ever proceed from a superficial mind". Arundhati Roy's novel proceeds from a very close and careful study of the life, the human beings and the atmosphere of that area. Since Roy knew the region well, she could use it successfully to provide a setting for her themes.

This therefore leads to the fact that her characters are real, actual, and drawn from personal observation. Like Chaucer's immortal figures of *Canterbury Tales*, the characters here also are so realistic that we feel as if we have actually met them, talked to them, supped with them and so on and so forth. In other words, the characters are life-like, made of same flesh and blood as we, not airy products of imagination or mere phantoms of brain.

The second important feature of the characters here is that they are both types and individuals. They do have in them racial characteristics and possess all typical traits, both good and bad, of the class to which they belong and professions they do, but they also have in them individual traits. Like all great character painters such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Fielding etc.,- Roy strikes a beautiful balance between the typical and the individual. Moreover, they are also universal. Such figures are always found in all ages, all countries and all climates. As one age falls, another rises, we find the same characters again and again, though in different shapes and colours. Mammachi, Sophie Mol, Estha, Pappachi, Rahel, Ammu, Velutha etc. •will stay with us popping once in a while, to remind us of some eternal truth.

Roy's characters are both flat and round. Characters like Pappachi, Mammachi, BabyKochamma are static and flat, not changing at all. Change is the law of nature and every wise man or woman changes accordingly. However, there are characters like Ammu, Velutha and others who are more flexible. The novelist deserves a word of praise for creating such round characters.

The characters whether major or minor, good or bad, are tragic. Like Hardy's they suffer and find that their dreams are always shattered in the end. Tragedy comes to them as if they are destined to suffer. Happiness may come to them but it is, as Hardy said, an occasional interlude in the general drama of pain. All the characters thus present a saga of lost dreams, for each character has a story of lost dream to tell. The God of Small Things is a chronicle of a society where we meet people suffering severely.

The novel has infinite variety of characters. It is here that we find 'God's plenty'. The characters in the novel seem to feel, think and act independently yet a closer examination reveals the presence of the author (their creator) behind these characters. The all-knowing author frequently adds her authorial comments and the characters thus become the mouthpieces of the author. They say what they are made to say and do what they are made to do. Nevertheless, the fact remains that they are not like gramophone records, singing his or her master's voice. In short Roy has delineated her characters in such a fine manner that we feel that she is there behind all characters and yet she is not there.

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