

Social justice in *The God of Small Things*

Dr. SHAKIBUR REHMAN KHAN

Assistant Professor in English

Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Alkharj

Abstract:

The paper Social justice in The God of Small Things explores the dimensions of class struggle and the monolithic structure of the migrated Syrian Christians. The migrated ones have clung to a class composition based on the Hindu hierarchy as a cultural import. Roy examines the implications of such hypocrisy and the aftermath of a struggle in terms of social justice that eludes the seemingly homogenous and integrated migrated Christians.

Key words: *Consciousness, discrimination, isolation, untouchability*

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy was hardly a known literary figure prior to the appearance of her maiden fictional effort "*The God of Small Things*" which has a fairytale graduation into the very psyche of the modern, fiction. The dramatic popularity and the unprecedented glare of international publicity attached to *The God of Small Things*" has reduced everything into a pale shadow of its own monumental past. Roy graduates into the intricacies of the fictional art through her very first novel, which even the many, established English novelists of yore could not achieve. Is it the marvel of her genius or is it the sheer magic of her language which has catapulted her to the

height very few novelists could reach? Arundhati Roy is a class apart and if it at all her fiction pulsates with the rhythm of realism and life like dimensions then, I am afraid she is not alone in the race, for there have been generations of writers who have gone about writing both realistic and bold novels. And therefore the very fuss about Arundhati Roy's' *The God of Small Things* is a bit too interesting to examine as to what exactly she does in her novel? The observation of those present during the ceremony paints a rather exciting yet British mind set was ostensibly upset when a writer from nowhere emerged to a rousing reception for crafting an art that was both scintillating yet pulverizing. The following statement speaks loud and clear about the strange response of qualified intellectuals.

The malice of the British writers and critics is in striking contrast to international readers' response to *The God of Small Things*, and tells us a lot about the damaging insularity of the U.K. literary scene. Over and over again Roy's book was called "derivative" because it was about India (and hadn't Salman Rushdie already "done" India?), whereas MacLaverty's was praised for its theme of return to a troubled homeland, which "is a favorite theme for Irish novelists at the moment, amounting almost to a genre."

At our table we rose and cheered. Roy, who had prepared no acceptance speech and was tearful on the podium, was a gracious and modest winner.

Arundhati Roy in the first place appears to be a mature and conscious artist who knows what she has to portray and how she has to cast the lengthening shadows of blurred figures drawn from diverse classes into fully developed and realized characters assigning meaningful and well-crafted roles to them with so little an involvement into the life of the created figures at times reflecting a complete objective vision. This objectivity is a major feature of her art and the metamorphosis of commonplace observations into hard facts of life is a reflection of her artistic skill. Christian hypocrisy is one of the announced

subjects but in dealing with such sensitive issues she never goes berserk rather she weaves them into a complex whole of the story with commendable ease. The background provided by Ayemenem first projected as the unifying thread, the nerve Centre of activities is gradually turned into a savage and grotesque symbol of suffocation and nothingness 'Ayemenem' operates as a symbol of both gloss and glitz of life, the hope and despair, the meaning and meaninglessness where a series of characters delineated gradually live, throb, flourish and perish into the bewildering complexities of life. Roy never lets her grip loosen on one tight spot of the novel Ayemenem. Much of the action takes place here with the appearance of Ammu, one of the most prominent figures of the novel with her twin kids Estha and Rahel, the residue of her fractured marriage or the token of love whatever she had from her husband who was a heavy boozier, resolute enough to compromise anything but drinking alcohol which eventually separated them. Ammu towards the beginning is cast as a tortured soul firm, resolute and dynamic enough to put at stake her youthful exuberance than accepting the burden of a drinking husband. Ammu's only meaningful business is to groom her two kids with utmost care teaching them the methods and manners of life though her own life was a saga of untold sufferings. Another character who has been discussed quite at length is Chacko, somewhat a globetrotting gypsy with English elegance and mannerism more than a handful of dust. In the evolution of Chacko's character Roy has shown a particular interest and the way she describes her is a full throated explanation of the very rationale of his existence. Chacko being an oxford educated person was exceedingly haughty, self-centered feigning to be a knowledgeable man. After he resigned from his lectureship from the Christian College of Madras he came to Ayemenem and started a business unveiling Mammachi and Ammu into, but fully owning the propriety issue 'paradise and preserves' which came into being at Ayemenem and went into shambles no sooner than it was established, Arundhati Roy in Chacko

creates both a figure of delight and awe, Chacko's physical appearance is noticeable. He had a surprisingly high laugh for a man of his size and fatness. And when he laughs he shook all over without appearing to move" Provides an insight into the physical constitution of Chacko who throughout the novel remains, an image of nothingness". His wayward movements, random chit-chats and the tendency to meddle into just about everything speak volumes about his being good for nothing. He is extravagant character who has no meaningful role to play in the thematic progress of the novel. He remains as embodiment of a hype created to sustain the halo of such atmosphere. Arundhati Roy makes him appear at intervals only to remind us of his existence.

MAIN BODY

But so far as the characterization is concerned Roy has achieved mastery, a power which very few can match. Characterization is her forte and given the creative interplay of language most of the characters have been saved from going astray. "The illustration of incident is but the illustration of character and the illustration of character is but the illustration of incident". This Henry James dictum applies fully to *The God of Small Things*. Among the characters that have stayed for a certain period as she keeps focusing her attention on the individual characters all have stayed together in fast shifting locales. For Ammu, Roy has taken special pains in delineating her before she becomes a mother of twins. She is projected as a young colourful and charming lady. Withdrawn from higher education on economic ground, wedded to a person, who shattered all her dreams and fancies, leaving a wretched, sullen and pathos stricken woman, compelled to seek divorce from her drinking husband who finally settles at Ayemenem along with her twins Estha and Rahel on whom rest the whole vision of her life. Ammu remains a much revered character until the final part which makes a central figure.

He began to swim forwards quietly, cutting through the water with no fuss. He had almost reached the bank when she looked up and saw his feet touch the moody river bed. As he rose through the dark river and walked up the stone steps he saw the world they stood in was his. The water, the mud, the trees, the fish, the stars.

This indeed is the state of Velutha overawed in a frenzy of emotional configuration raised a vision, so private, so personal that even the water, mud trees, the fish and the stars were unified into a cosmic whole. While on the other hand Ammu was equally willing to come out of the detestable shackles, the thread of morality weaved around her by the forces she always disliked from the core of her heart.

She went to him and laid the length of her body against his. He just stood there. He did not touch her. He was shivering partly with cold. Partly with terror, partly aching desire. Despite this fear, his body was prepared to take the bait. It wanted her urgently.

Is an illustration of the doubt of Velutha who was so willing to be with Ammu as he needed her body urgently but his mind was under the influence of some unexplored forces that made him shiver and shudder with consternation, a product of century old stigma of charred relationship which must escape the eyes of over watchful society? Still the resolution is loud and clear.

I could lose everything, my jobs, my family, my life, everything. p.10

It is the very predicament, the inability to develop a coherent vision for Velutha who has the deepest of conviction viewed with skepticism and refuses moral sanctions. The result obviously is Ammu and Velutha who escape in the darkness of night to perform an act which the so called civilized human society denounces under the weight of its own misplaced Puritanism.

She unbuttoned her shirt. They stood true skin to skin. Her brownness against his blankness. Her softness against his bardness. Her brown breasts (that wouldn't support toothbrush) against his smooth ebony chest. She smelled the river on him his particular paravan smell that so disgusted baby Kocchamma. Ammu put her tongue and eased it in the hollow of his throat on the lobe of his ear.

She pulled his head down forward and kissed his mouth. A cloudy kiss. One that demanded a kiss back. He kissed her back, first cautiously, then urgently. His arms came behind her. He stroked her back. Very gently. She could feel the skin of his arms Rough callused. Sandpaper.

This reminds us of the Lawrentian warmth of the physical union between Paul and Clara. The sheer force of terrifying passions, the remorse of a seemingly sinful act is replete with an overriding sense of consummation even though it amounted to a flagrant violation of an established code of the human society. Roy possibly is aware of the constrains of an orthodox set-up infected by a virus of relationship frowned upon by the practicing puritans though they themselves in the darkness of night have accomplished feats contrary to the ideals that stand for in the light of the day. This is the very dilemma which Arundhati Roy refers to in "*The God of Small Things*."

Her being a morally upright, strong willed person takes a nose dive when she submits herself to the Paraven Veleuth, the untouchable with whom she settles for physical relationship which calls in question the basic Christian morality of the migrated Syrian Christians of Kerala. Arundhati Roy does not expose the much trumpeted morality in a jiffy as she stretches it to the very last where the assault is unleashed. Indeed, Roy takes meticulous care about projecting Ammu, the revered character is replaced by despicable devil residing inside her.

Her relationship with the supposedly untouchable Veleutha towards the final part of the novel is the real climax, an antithesis of what has been professed and practiced in a conservative Christiana society. (P-5)

Roy has a roving eye and does not get fixed nor does remain a passive observer of things. She is aware of what she is creating and the statements she is making through her characters. There is a method about the presentation of her characters. She lets them be into the novel for a short while, provides some inkling about them and leave them there, only, to return later with some details and events for them. Such a style of character portraiture demands total control, involvement and the flash back accuracy to streamline them and render them as integral parts of the book. Roy has achieved this with amazing authenticity and compelling flair. The other characters of importance are of course the twins Estha and Rahel who grow under the shadows of Ammu's protective umbrella.

To Ammu her twin seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs find each other's company lolloping arm in arm down a high way full of hurting traffic. p.8

Two creatures separated by minutes and delivered from the same womb in fact represent a break away from the traditional twins, dissimilar in habits and tastes thoroughly incompatible in methods and manners and most unlike in behavior are controlled by a single influence, Ammu, who shapes them like a hen clutching on to eggs waiting for them to come out of shell. Estha is basically disinterested, not much inclined towards the worldly business grows with the impression of being a recessive child and remains so till the very end. Rahel, the female child has shown a bit of interest in watching things with curious eyes but she resigns to Aeymenem after she quits USA where she had stayed for quite some time.

Mammachi, Margret Kocchamma, Sophie Mol, Bappachi Kochumana, kuttapen velleppa are the typical keralite names which provide colour and variety to the myriad characters. What tends to be little more fascinating and little surprising is Arundhati Roy's familiarity with the Keralite names which she has used with ease and élan and the way she has portrayed them is an evidence of her wide ranging information, her

proximity to the details of the Kerala landscape, its wonderful aura of physical splendour and the typical landscape.

Apart from the characterization what is to be specially noticed is Roy's understanding of the contemporary political scenario from where she draws figures like Nambodripad and pillai, the novelist making references to the Government and its politics and the whole Kerala under its impact playing to its tunes. This is a political commentary quite update spelling out its complexities and problems with local colour as if the novelist has done a special training course on Kerala. She seems to be aware even of the dust of Kerala, its colour and character which is no mean achievement.

What attracts the common reader to Roy's fictional oeuvre is ostensibly the living immediacy of the language. The sustained use of similes which might be more cogently perceptible in the lyric verse adds a fresh dimension to her idioms. The spurt of lyric energy tends to spillover, sometimes snap the metronome is fully mastered and sustained by a deft hand of the artist. The Joycean epiphany articulating itself in terms of brief, toneless and sometimes gnomic utterances constitute the metrics of Joyce's prose. It is curious to see how Roy deliberately veers away from the traditional syntax of the naturalist prose. A grasp of reality political, social and intellectual is correspondingly reinforced by a passionate concern for symbols. The symbols of the orthodox traditions so hoary to Raja Rao no longer hold sway. Roy it is obvious has extricated her art from the fact ridden realism of the naturalist and invested it with rich symbolic energy. The expressiveness, the livingness of the intelligence and the sophistication of the artist indeed convince us that there is a new experiment with the fictional technique of the modern times.

Arundhati Roy is a wonderful articulate artist who has raised a vision of civilization facing the threats of liquidation at the hands of some elements ought to create a kind of moral imbalance about the original scheme of things. The world is constituted out of some very small things of day-to-day life, a

microcosm of humanity, an apocalypse of evil, a flowing phantom empire where people exist. Gods are feared, angels tread, yet the gloom besets their world not alien to imperfections. The characters in her world move and interact, dismantling edges, borders, boundaries, brinks and limits only to be separated by their horizons, only to be brilliant clowns of a bankrupt circus.

The God of Small Things seen in totality is a coherent whole born out of a cohesive imagination, a symbolism for life, for death, the relentless optimism and the stark pessimism. The world, she created is no island, it is the same old material world, inhabited by men women and children where the values are loved and the vices are condemned.

Trisha Bhattacharya writes:

Over time humans have created a complex system of cultural mores in order to assist in the categorization of life and assign meaning to events as well as defining behavior and perception. Ironically, the very system of norms and mores that humans create to help structure their world ends up structure them. Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* gives readers a deeper view into the way cultural norms and mores shape and define personal character. For the main characters of the novel, both India's caste system as well as the Love Laws change and mold, not only the events of the story, but the characters themselves.

Sarah remarks:

The rigid societal bonds of the caste system cause the characters of *The God of Small Things* to yield to other laws that permeate throughout the novel's pages. A cultural code of ethical relationships; the Love Laws are violated by many of the main characters leading to woes of great proportion. The reader is first made aware of this concept in chapter one, page 33, when it is said by the narrator "that it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much." These love laws had their basis in the Indian caste system, and rightful relationships were seen as ones that did not violate the social

standing of the individual. In the novel, the characters Estha, Rahel, Ammu, and Velutha are the prime violators of these culturally designed relationships. For Estha and Rahel, first it is their public love of Velutha that is considered unacceptable because he belongs to the class of untouchables. This relationship with an untouchable is also seen with their mother, Ammu, who enters into a sexual relationship with him, as mentioned earlier. Much later in the novel, we are then presented with another situation in which the narrator says; “Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (Roy 311). This scene is that of an incestuous night of lust between Estha and Rahel that, rather than being out of lust, is an action that is the result of their mutual grief. This was a violation not of the Love Laws that designated who a person could love in the terms of class, but of how family members love one another.

CONCLUSION

In all fairness it must be said as a matter of conclusion that *The God of small things* transcends all barriers of time, space and geography as it is not confined to particular segment of human cosmos, here the life is at its very best and at its tragic worst. Class awareness and its complexities are reflected in Ammu and veluetha much more explicitly than anywhere else in the novel. Roy rues and attacks the division and sharp distinction in a culture imported from outside the boundaries but today those boundaries have been dismantled and the new invasions either as colonial remains or the religious interference in hampering the process of social justice are in collision with the utopian statements.

REFERENCES

1. Arundhati, Roy. **The God of Small Things**. Penguin Books India, 2002

2. Bayly, Susan. **Saints, Goddesses, and Kings.** Cambridge University Press, 1989.
3. Singh, K.S **The Schedule Castes: The People of India.** National Series Volume 2 of the Anthropological Survey of India. Delhi: Oxford Up, 1993.
4. **Federal Research Division. India: A Country Study.** Eds. James Heitzman and Robert L. Warden. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton UP, 1995
5. THE 1997 BOOKER PRIZE WINNER.
6. Popularity pays off for Roy, by Dan Glaister, arts correspondent, Tuesday October 14, 1997 , The Guardian
7. Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: an analysis and summary. ARTICLE HUMAN RIGHTS & PRESS FREEDOM, May 2015. By Trisha Bhattacharya.
8. Posted 30th January 2012. Sarah