

ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS: UNFOLDING PARADOXICAL CELEBRATION OF SMALLNESS

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Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* unfurls a plethora of details regarding the changing political scene in Kerala, the problems besetting women in a male dominated society, caste taboos, the lives of rudderless children of a broken home, and in the main, vivid descriptions of bees and birds, flowers and trees, sky and river, in a language that is immensely captivating. She narrates the pain and misery of a lonesome mother in an indifferent world as perceived through the eyes of her seven-year-old children- a world where the age-old subjugation of women and the indescribable humiliation of the under class still persist. Despite the various forums focusing on the women's physical, financial and emotional exploitation together with their mental anguish, traces of oppression seem to have stayed. One cannot emphatically say that the women's unequal status in society is a legacy of the past or it is culture specific. But one can point that in Indian society the inequality is legitimized by the caste system which seems operative in the novel in 1969. The discrimination against women and the Paravans, a despised lot, seem to overpower and overwhelm the reader. The disparity between man and woman is a result of the complex operation of economic, political, social and other factors. In spite of the significant change in women's position in society in the post-Independence era, she is still not totally emancipated. These contradictions can best be understood by examining the Indian social structure which comprises institutions like caste, joint family and religious values and practices consolidating women's subordinate position.

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy implicitly presses for greater social reform in the rigid positioning of women and the intolerable plight of the deprived class. The world of her novel is caught in a state of flux where the values of the patriarchal society are under attack from a new world in which self-interest, self-aggrandizements, and social equality are forcing their way. Seen from a feminist perspective, the novel is about the violence inflicted on women and the paternal tyranny enveloping the unfortunate children. It exposes the double standards of morality in society regarding men and women, the passive, docile role of

a wife in a man-woman relationship, and the malicious role of a woman in perpetuating the humiliation of another woman by a male. Roy has depicted the routine goings-on in an upper-class Syrian Christian family at Ayemenem, situated in the lush green area of Kerala abounding in natural beauty with the mysterious Meenachal cruising along its periphery. She deftly balances and eases the tensions accumulated from the cruel realities of life by shifting the attention to the dazzling delights of nature in an innocent, musical language structure that pours from the heart and mind of a child. It is through the play with words, coinage of new phrases that the children are able to lighten the dense and dark moments in a way providing some relief and simultaneously evoking pathos. The two seven-year-old protagonists Estha and Rahel, male and female are twins. They are thirty-one now, the age their mother Ammu was when she died. Their being by themselves and not having established any permanent link with the outside world bespeaks of the negative impact the traumas of childhood have had on their development. When children, their apprehension "They knew that things could change in a day" (*The God of Small Things* 339) rings true with the sudden death of their nine-year-old cousin Sophie Mol, on a Christmas vacation from England. This tragedy emotionally wrecked the entire family and signaled a nightmare for Ammu and her twins. It overturned their lives in a day that is why the urge to "Prepare to prepare to be prepared," (*The God of Small Things* 200) had all along been so strong. It all began with Ammu, accompanying her parents to Ayemenem after her father's retirement. Being denied a college education, marriage for her also became a difficult proposition as dowry could not be afforded. So she had to wait at home and become domesticated. Before long Ammu began to feel stifled by the restrictive atmosphere of the house. Worst of all were Pappachi's outbursts of physical violence inflicted on Mammachi from time to time.

These irrational bouts were most unbecoming of a man who had been an Imperial Entomologist under the British and after Independence, a Joint Director of Entomology. His achievement of having discovered a

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rare moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts brought only partial fulfilment, as the moth was never named after him. He beat his wife with a brass flower vase every night till Chacko intervened and put a permanent stop. The only escape for Ammu, from the oppressive atmosphere was through marriage. While taking a break at an Aunt's place in Calcutta, she chanced upon a sober-looking Hindu Bengali from the tea-estates in Assam, and without looking back stepped into matrimony. In no time, the gloss wore off and she became a victim of her husband's drunken rages. When they began to spill over to the two-year-old twins, Ammu thought it time to pack up and go. Mr. Hollick, the employer had also sounded a warning and later advised him to go away for a while, for treatment perhaps, and send his wife to his premises to be 'looked after'. Finding no viable solution to his drunken stupor, and fearing her own vulnerability, Ammu returned reluctantly, to her parent's home. Here, she was more of an intruder and less of a member of the house as she had been married, and according to Baby Kochamma, her Aunt "she had no position at all" (The God of Small Things 45), as she had been divorced. With such a disqualification she had no choice but to suffer the fate of a wretched, man-less woman. Baby Kochamma became Ammu's greatest rival as in Ammu she saw a potential threat to the safe niche she had created for herself over the years. Her fear of being dispossessed increased with the swelling up of numbers in the house and she made no bones about her displeasure: In the way that the unfortunate sometimes dislike the co-unfortunate, Baby Kochamma disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. (The God of Small Things 45) Both Ammu and Chacko are in a similar position as far as their marital status is concerned.

Ammu had been a victim of battering while Chacko had been discarded by his wife for his lethargic, unproductive ways. But in Ayemenem, Chacko holds the reins of control, being a male and Ammu is at his mercy for her and her children's subsistence. Legally Ammu has no claim on the property as outdated and outmoded inheritance rights are weighted against her. Even Mammachi though actually blind, turns a blind eye to Ammu's needs and discomforts and her children's development. Instead, she looks up to Chacko, he being the only male support after her husband's death, tolerates his 'libertine relationships' with the women in the factory and in a way frees him of any kind of burden by quietly paying them off. Simone de Beauvoir asserts that: Marriage is not only an honourable career and one less tiring than many others: it alone permits a woman to keep her social dignity intact and at the same time find sexual fulfilment

as loved one and mother... (The Second Sex 62) Though Ammu quarrels with her fate, yet she does not achieve anything concrete. She has too many fronts to cope with- her personal misery and her children's upbringing. She has to love them double because they don't have a Baba and Chacko fails to meet their expectations even half-way. Sophie Mol, his nine-year-old daughter perceives his indifference to the twins within a few days of her arrival and suggests that he loves them instead. Ammu's fault is that she is too mild and docile to assert herself.

Thus, Ammu moves around without being heard. The male tyranny that is unleashed on her takes a cruel form in her parents' home- it is a battering that does not show but corrodes one from within. The arrival of Sophie Mol seems to ignite the so far contained and suppressed conflicts. The preferential treatment shown toward Chacko's widowed ex-wife and their daughter is openly displayed in front of all and sundry, throwing Ammu and her twins into complete isolation. This is too severe a blow for Ammu to bear, so she looks away only to find that Rahel has already escaped to the animated world of Velutha- a world of warmth and sincerity. She, while searching for an anchor catches the intent gaze of Velutha when he is tossing Rahel in the air, and both share a moment of intense desire for each other, the like of which they had never imagined or dreamt of before. Velutha noticed Ammu as a woman and felt that he had something to share with her and that she too had gifts to give him. Not having any right on anything whatsoever and constantly being made to feel dejected and low, Ammu is lured by Velutha's meaningful gaze. Unable to hold herself she breaks free of all the constraints and barriers and walks across to the life-infusing company of the despised Paravan. She did not stop to judge the consequences, for nothing could be worse than what she had already faced. Initially, she found her children's fondness for a man, who was subservient to the household somewhat odd. But he filled their days with a life they craved and hungered for. What their own father or Chacko could not give, Velutha gave in plenty. He played their games, satiated their thirst for stories, and above all gave them true love. Though caste was more practised by the Hindus, some of its features had affected other religions too. The members of the Ayemenem house were Syrian Christians yet they followed the caste values of the Hindus, and likewise shirked from the Untouchables. The caste taboos were still prevalent and not a part of India's past history.

Ammu was tricked into confinement, castigated vehemently and finally disowned and disinherited by the family. What she did and where she went was no

one's concern. She was discouraged from visiting Rahel who was kept at Ayemenem, lest she have a bad influence on her. In death she was alone in a grimy, dingy room of Bharat Lodge in Allepey. She was denied dignity of a funeral as "The church refused to bury Ammu..." "So, Chacko had her wrapped in a dirty bed sheet and laid out on a stretcher." (The God of Small Things 162) and cremated in an electric crematorium where beggars, derelicts, and the police custody were taken. And none from the family save Rahel attended.

Even the church did not spare Ammu on account of her grave sin. On the other side, Velutha was hounded by the police on charges of rape lodged against him by the malicious Baby Kochamma, and beaten black and blue till he bled to death. His one sin seemed to have been darker than Chacko's many sins of the same nature. The actual facts of the scandal were camouflaged and never established even after Ammu's confession to Inspector Thomas Mathew. Rahel was left in the care of Chacko who was

disinterested in her affairs from the beginning. Estha, who was sent to his father and stepmother, was returned to Ayemenem owing to his abnormally quiet ways. He exhibited traits of an introvert, while Rahel was just the opposite- detached and aggressive. It seemed that the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers bodies. (The God of Small Things 20)

Arundhati Roy has revealed how perceptive seven-year-old is at that tender age to their immediate surroundings — here to their mother's pain and misery. And, how they make adjustments and compromises in order to alleviate her suffering. Roy has drawn the bare bones of the characters from the family as her own mother faced much trauma in her parental home being separated from her husband. Even though her work has own wide appreciation for its radical difference for being unlike may other work and particularly for its verbal exuberance yet in it are all the ingredients of a patriarchal world where men remain more equal than women.