

A Analysis on the Arundhati Roy Novels – An Overview

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy, a very famous author from India, won the Booker Prize for her book *The God of Small Things* in 1997. The novel is a semi-autobiographical. Arundhati Roy is also an activist who writes and speaks on issues concerning the environment, non-violence and also on human rights. She has written several nonfiction books like *The Cost of Living*, *The Shape of the Beast: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*, *The Greater Common Good*, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* and many other titles.

The God of Small Things is the story of a Christian family from Kerala. The book is divided into 21 different chapters of varying lengths. The chapters are not internally sequential—flashbacks quietly blend into the present and vice versa. The past intermingles with the present, leaving its traces and influencing events that shock and pain. Following is an analysis and summary of the 21 chapters of the book. *The God of Small Things* is, in many ways, a meditation on the kinds of violence that get imposed when boundaries are crossed. Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Velutha, Chacko, Margaret, Sophie Mol, Rahel, Estha – all of them suffer at least a dislocation, and, in some cases, an internal or external violence.

The God of Small Things was the debut novel of an eminent Man Booker Prize winning author Arundhati Roy. The novel explores the childhood experience of fraternal twins by adopting the Bildungsroman techniques as narrative pattern. It explores the themes of social discriminations, class relations and cultural tensions, Indian history and politics, forbidden love, betrayal, etc. The novel is rich from the point of Narrative pattern and its techniques. Roy applies traditional, as well as, innovative techniques to build a story which reflects Indian consciousness. Narrative technique is the method and device used by writers to narrate stories. It works upon specific uses of phrases, punctuations or exaggerations of description. Roy, in order to narrate the novel, uses literary devices like- defamiliarization, similes & metaphors, repetition of words and phrases, epigrams and paradoxes, irony, oxymoron, metonymy, synecdoche, pun, saying versus showing in her writing, flashback narrative technique. She also uses some sound oriented techniques like- rhythm, alliteration, internal rhyme, assonance, dissonance, etc. The content of Arundhati Roy's writing basically focuses on feminist perceptions, post-colonial dimensions, politics, literary tourism and her Indianness.

Key words: Narrative pattern, God of small things, social discriminations, class relations, oxymoron, metonymy, synecdoche, Indian consciousness, Arundhati Roy

Introduction

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techniques to build a story which reflects Indian consciousness. The literary techniques which she uses are still relevant and caught the attention of readers when the novel was published in 1997. The paper focuses on the use narrative technique used by Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things*.

Narrative technique is the method and device used by writers to narrate stories. It works upon specific uses of phrases, punctuations or exaggerations of description. Although every storyteller uses few foundational techniques but a part of writer is visible in its employment of his own way of narrating the story. Although there are so many technical aspects of narrative technique but setting, plot, perspective, style, theme and character form the crux of any narration. When an author is as stylistic as Roy, she says a great deal through her style. Her kind of writing lends itself extremely well to literary interpretation because it is possible to find several meanings in her writing that lie hidden behind her style. No interpretation of such a literary style can be final. Yet an endeavour must be made to go beyond the surface of her writing. The fact that it is a woman writer that is in question also becomes evident from her stylistic utterances. The feminine sensibility, obvious or not, is another point of investigation that her style provides. Roy, in order to narrate the novel, uses literary devices like- defamiliarization, similes & metaphors, repetition of words and phrases, epigrams and paradoxes, irony, oxymoron, metonymy, synecdoche, pun, saying versus showing in her writing, flashback narrative technique. She also uses some sound oriented techniques like- rhythm, alliteration, internal rhyme, assonance, dissonance, etc. The content of Arundhati Roy's writing basically focuses on feminist perceptions, post-colonial dimensions, politics, literary tourism and her Indianness.

The use of repetition in Arundhati Roy's novel is very significant it adds both emphasis and rhythm to its prose. Here are few examples: My dearest Papa, I am well and happy in the service of our lady. But Koh-inoor appears to be unhappy and homesick My dearest Papa, Today Koh-inoor vomited after lunch and is running a temperature. My dearest Papa, convent food does not seem to suit Koh-i-noor through I like it well enough. My dearest Papa, Koh-i-noor is upset because her family seems to neither understand nor are about her wellbeing . . . (p. 25). Here is repetition of the words 'My dearest Papa' and 'Koh-i-noor'. The Repetition of 'my dearest papa' shows the flattery as well as the constant pleading in the voice of Baby Kochamma to get favour. That is, she wants her father to bring her back from convent.

Objective:

This paper seeks to analyze the Ms. Roy's novel *God of small things*, its themes, language and treatment. Keeping in mind the political motivations of the characters

Plot Summary and motifs

There are a number of essential motifs and themes within the plot of Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, but none so important as Love, a central theme in the novel. Love is found embodied in varying unpredictable relationships, but its steadfast appearance makes it a constant theme in the book. It seems that for every instance of unrequited love there is a love that is reciprocated. The strange almost transcendental love between Estha and Rahel is perhaps the most obvious and most frequently described love. The familial love between Chacko and his ex-wife, Margaret, and daughter, Sophie, is another kind of love. Finally the romantic love between Ammu and Velutha, the forbidden, mutual love, is as destructive as it is powerful. The love in *The God of Small Things* is a rebellious love that violates social rules in almost every case.

Estha and Rahel, the fraternal twins and protagonists, have a special kind of love between them. They share a bond that no other two characters in the book have. In the early years of their lives, they “thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us.” (Roy 4). It is clear that there is a love connection between them that spans beyond their genetic similarities. They look to each other for approval (Roy 78), and even share experiences that only one of them has actually experienced. For example, Rahel can recall waking up giggling at Estha’s funny dream, and tasting tomato sandwiches that Estha ate (Roy 5). The childhood relationship between them is more than just a filial bond; it is a special loving connection.

The love between Estha and Rahel is also one of the strangest. When they grow older, they no longer have the special bond that they used to share. There still is a connection between them, but it is different in nature. Rahel and Estha are not uncomfortable standing around each other naked, even as adults, which almost acts as a foreshadowing for the events near the end of the novel (88-89). In chapter 20 their relationship evolves into an incestuous one, a supporting example of love that breaks customary rules of society. Their relationship is made to sound like one that continues to extend past the usual boundaries of love that brother and sister should share. This extension ends after they engage in the greatest act of love possible.

Major Themes

The familial love that Chacko has for his daughter and ex-wife can be understood as unbounded. He loves them both unconditionally and takes great care to show it. This is especially prevalent when Sophie and Margaret arrive in India (131) and Chacko buys roses for them. Sadly both Margaret and Sophie loved Joe, Margaret’s second husband, more than they love Chacko, thus giving him an unrequited love that is not uncommon in this book. We learn that while Margaret was Chacko’s first female friend, and he truly loved her, Margaret’s “love” for him was a temporary passion. She loved Chacko in a sense, but only because she had never met someone like him before. She was in the process of accepting who she was independent of her family and embarking on the journey of young adulthood. Now Chacko, by trying to rekindle the love he lost with his daughter and ex-wife, is (in a sense) breaking a societal love law as well. He has already divorced Margaret and has not experienced the greater part of Sophie’s life. It is difficult for him to understand that he has missed something that cannot be replaced or regained.

Ammu and Velutha’s forbidden love is another of the important love cases in the novel. Ammu and Velutha belong to two different classes in the Indian caste system, and they both realize that they will not live long if they continue seeing each other. Regardless, they continue to meet secretly to talk about “the small things” in their lives, because they both know that there will be nothing more important in their futures. Ammu loves Velutha because he is lower class. Velutha has humility and appreciation for “small things” that no one else in Ammu’s life has. Their love is arguably the strongest in the book, because they continue to love each other even when they are certain of their approaching fates. The book is named after Velutha, in one sense, because he, to Ammu, is the “God of Small Things.” He becomes her god, and allows her to escape the prejudice and obsession with class that her family has. Because they both appreciate the small things in their lives, they have a special connection that proves impossible to break, even in the face of danger and death. This is the most obvious case of love that violates the rules laid down by society, since it is considered an abomination in India to make love to someone outside of your social class.

Love is a central theme in the Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*. The love relationships in the novel are not always mutual, but the overwhelming majority breaks the social rules, or Love Laws, of India. The love between Estha and Rahel is an interesting love, and belongs to its own class of relationship. Chacko's love for Margaret and Sophie is a prime example of unrequited love. The love between Velutha and Ammu is the most socially unacceptable of all, but is described as the most justified because of their mutual appreciation of "small things." *The God of Small Things* is, predominantly, a love story.

Temper and tenor of the novel

The God of Small Things is, in many ways, a meditation on the kinds of violence that get imposed when boundaries are crossed. Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Velutha, Chacko, Margaret, Sophie Mol, Rahel, Estha – all of them suffer at least a dislocation, and, in some cases, an internal or external violence.

Ammu "tampers with the laws" from the outset (of both the novel and her life, at twenty-seven years of age) by marrying Pappachi, a charming alcoholic, but a terrible husband and father. Of course, Ammu "didn't pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply." (39).

Worse, Ammu is seen partially through the glinting, vicious eyes of Baby Kochamma, the "incumbent baby grandaunt" (44). She resents Ammu along religious boundaries – Ammu has produced two "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" (44) – but also because Ammu quarrels with the "fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (45), a fate that Kochamma outwardly claims to be untouched by.

Ammu quarrels with this fate, we discover as the novel gathers tremendous speed, by taking on an Untouchable (Velutha) as a lover. He is, in many ways, the silent surrogate father to the twins; nevertheless, Ammu's "biologically-designed dance" (317) with Velutha imbricates her in the severe systemic discrimination that the novel so powerfully laments. Ammu ends up exiled, from her children, from herself, from her biological potential, and dies very alone.

Baby Kochamma refuses to cross into forbidden territory. She is a liminal figure in the novel, always hovering on the edges of the narrative, manipulating and stroking Velutha while Mamacchi casts him into oblivion, and then spitting poisonously all over him. She has a deep understanding and fear for the way in which religion and sexuality are intertwined. She loves and fails to win Father Mulligan as a younger woman, and is only happy when he dies, because – "if anything, she possessed him in death in a way that she never had while she was alive. At least her memory of him was hers. Wholly hers. Savagely, fiercely, hers" (282).

Desire infiltrates her body, and almost makes it burst from the inside out. She, above all, tampers with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. She "loves" white Sophie Mol because she is "Other" to Ammu's children. Herself a product of a hybrid union, Sophie is used as a beating-stick by Kochamma: a stick that beats alienation and the intensified feeling of otherness into the twins, both victims of erasure: one of them "Quietness," the other "Emptiness" (311). Sophie Mol is apparently

“more loved” than the twins – of particularly great concern to Rahel, who is told earlier on (by means of a stern admonition from her Ammu) that a child is possibly loved just a little less whenever they anger their parent.

Many characters try to preserve old memories and traditions in the novel, but Roy also portrays the inevitable march of change through small shifts in the status quo. Paradise Pickles & Preserves is the most obvious symbol of preservation (pickling things to preserve them), as Mammachi and the people of Ayemenem cling to the old caste system and the gender double standard. In places like Mammachi’s house and the “History House” things linger from the past and are nursed and kept alive, like the “Loss of Sophie Mol” or the ghost of Kari Saipu. Other than through its name, the History House also becomes a symbol of preservation as the resting place of Rahel’s plastic watch with the time painted on it – a small example of literally freezing time.

Small things

Despite these attempts at preservation, the pickle jars keep leaking, and one of the book’s common refrains is “things can change in a day.” Much of the action takes place in two days, one in 1969 and one in 1993 – the days of Sophie Mol’s death and Rahel’s reunion with Estha. The efforts to preserve tradition are eroded away, and change still comes to both characters and country through the “small things.” Ammu gets divorced and then loves an Untouchable, defying gender roles and the caste system, and the Marxist movement gains power and overturns the system of landlords and laborers. Small things like Ammu’s warning that she loves Rahel “a little less” lead to big events like Rahel and Estha running away, which in turn leads to Sophie Mol’s death.

In both the novel’s title and in her writing style, Roy emphasizes the small moments, objects, and changes that symbolize and lead to the “Big Things” in life, like death, love, and political upheaval. Much of *The God of Small Things* is written in a kind of free indirect discourse, a style where the third-person narrator partly perceives the world in the childlike way that young Estha and Rahel do. This leads to many words written oddly (like “Bar Nowl” or “Locusts Stand I”) but also to an emphasis on the innocent way a child sees the world, focusing on certain images and words. Through this lens, Roy dwells on small things like Rahel’s watch, Estha’s “Two Thoughts,” and the little Marxist flag instead of straightforwardly describing the plot of the story.

Within the narrative itself, Roy often points out that small talk is a mask for large, hidden feelings. The most important example of this is in Ammu and Velusha’s relationship at the end of the book. Instead of speaking of the huge taboo they are breaking or the impossibility of their future, the two lovers focus on the bugs in the jungle around them and look no farther than “tomorrow.” While the “Big Things” eventually reveal themselves, it is the small things of the novel that make the story so poignant and human, and Roy’s writing style so intimate.

Love comes in many forms in *The God of Small Things*, but it is most important when it crosses divides of society and duty. The relationship between Estha and Rahel is the strongest of the book, as the two are so close as to almost consider themselves

one person. Yet when the young Rahel lists the people she loves she does not include Estha, but instead those she is “supposed” to love according to familial duty. Roy emphasizes the “Love Laws” early and often, foreshadowing the importance she will give to love that crosses boundaries of society and tradition. The central example of this is Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, an Untouchable. This relationship is horrifying to the community and leads to Velutha’s death and Ammu’s exile, but it is also the most positive example of romantic love in the novel.

Unfortunately, love and sexuality often take on more violent and oppressive forms, as Mammachi is beaten by her husband and Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. Roy ends the novel with Estha and Rahel’s incestuous union after they are reunited, followed by Ammu’s first sexual encounter with Velutha. The poetic descriptions and juxtaposition of these scenes against violence and death gives them greater impact, and through them Roy shows that love can cross divides of politics and hatred. Even though such love can lead to tragedy, it is still incredibly valuable.

The members of the Ipe family deal with a variety of social and political influences that cause much internal and external struggle in the novel. In the larger society of Kerala, India (in the 1969 portion of the novel), Marxist ideas have taken root and begin to upset the class system of landlords and laborers. This directly affects Paradise Pickles and the characters of Velutha, Chacko, and Comrade Pillai. The ancient Hindu caste system is another important factor – this system was officially abolished years earlier, but it still remains strongly imprinted on the minds of the public. The “Love Laws” of the caste system are of particular significance, particularly the divide between Touchables and Untouchables (a caste seen as vastly inferior).

Most of the Ipe family is also “Syrian Christian,” and Mammachi and Baby Kochamma in particular use their faith to justify many of their actions. Estha and Rahel, who are half-Hindu, half-Syrian Christian, must then struggle with this conflicting identity. The gender double standard of Indian society is another large factor in the plot, as Pappachi and Chacko’s sins are generally overlooked, while Ammu is disgraced and scorned for being divorced. Overall, the “small things” that occur between the characters of the novel serve as a microcosm for the “big things” happening throughout India, as many political and social forces struggle against each other and the country leans towards violence and unrest.

Related themes icon Related Themes from Other Texts

Chacko, the twins’ uncle, is (or was) a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford who meets Margaret, a café waitress at the time of their meeting. Chacko has crossed into a forbidden white territory, but the novel takes pains to say that he is deeply uncomfortable with his Ayemenem roots; he more clearly identifies himself with White, educated, English life. He reaches Margaret through his laughter, and thus forces an average woman (in her mind) to love herself more than she did before she met him. But Chacko, too, is a hybrid figure, a “tortured Marxist....at war with an impossible, incurable Romantic” (232), and crosses the forbidden territory (as did his sister) of marriage without parental consent (or knowledge, in his case). Inevitably, the marriage itself suffers the ultimate Marxist fate, in that the seeds of its destruction were sowed in its inception. Margaret turns to Joe (who we really

only know as a “Joe-shaped Hole in the Universe”), himself a clichéd Englishman, and the opposite of Chacko, in that he is “Steady. Solvent. Thin” (235).

But Chacko and Margaret produce Sophie (Mol), and then they separate, and then Joe dies, and then (understanding that this is the distillation of a novel) Margaret and Sophie Mol cross into the forbidden territory of Ameyemenem – the forbiddenness felt financially (“Margaret Kochamma broke her term deposit and bought two airline tickets, London-Bombay-Kochin” [238]) and medically (Margaret brings every preventative medicine possible, but she cannot immunize against drowning).

Appropriately, *The God of Small Things* is concluded by two love-scenes of intense forbiddenness, one because it implies incest, the other because it crosses heavily stratified class (caste) boundaries. When the twins share one another at the end, it is clear that “what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief” (311). Arundhati Roy follows that last statement with the title quote to this paper. Only now (repeated on multiple occasions in the novel), the statement about their breaking the Love Laws is at least bitterly ironic, and – more to the point – is heavily weighted with all the implications of the destructiveness of class, sexual, and religious divisions. Estha is called “Quietness” in this scene and Rahel “Emptiness.” In brief, Estha’s quietness is brought about by his original crossing into the forbidden territory of the OrangeLemondrink Man’s slimy parlor at Abhilash Talkies. Rahel suffers emptiness in her eyes as a married woman in Washington; she suffers vast inner violation as Estha is “deported” deported by train at novel’s end; she has the fuzzy moth that flutters around her heart, nibbling away at its perimeter, every time the woman who is “Of one blood” (312) seems to love her a little less.

The last scene is one where all the other boundaries get transgressed: Velutha literally crosses the waters from the History House (a brilliant postmodern and postcolonial trope) to the riverbank, to – for the first time in the novel – move beyond the boundaries of how someone should be loved. For the lovers, there is simply “Naaley” : tomorrow. Though Chappu Thamburan (the Lord of Rubbish and spider who conceals himself) outlives Velutha, there is a deep, moving, and profound sadness in the estranged idiom of the lovers: a verbal and physical dance that suggests both the tragedy’s rootedness in its era and the imprint of its commerce with futurity.

Conclusion

Exquisite use of the English language, coupled with a haunting storyline, makes this book, an intense read. *The God of Small Things* is a pulchritudinous but tragic representative journey through India’s English speaking landscape. This book can stun, like no other, make one feel the anguish and pain of a mother, the sorrow of a child, the sufferings of lovers separated, the forced maturity thrust upon children, the separation of family members. And one will also witness the ploys exhibited by those who envy and the actions of those who cannot forgive.

The story is not sequent, it reveals itself in spurts—what happens now, affects what will happen later, what happened earlier, affects what happens now. There are parts in the story, which could be completely unacceptable to some readers. However, one wonders what the outcome would have been, had untouchability never been a factor and if only everyone was treated equally.

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