
ARUNDHATHI ROY'S POSTMODERNIST ART OF NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND THEME IN HER NOVEL "THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS."

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* is a typical Postcolonial text, as the basis of her imagination is the idea of Postcoloniality. Within this ambiance of the Postmodernist world, there are the ideas of transgression, hegemony hybridity, and mimicry. This is a difficult recitation, where the issues of the Orient, (that is, Said's Orient), the question of Feminist affirmation (or the lack of it), patriarchy and finally the important aspect, the question of the subaltern are the critical issues which Arundhati Roy's Postmodernist art discusses. Arundhati Roy's images in *The God of Small Things* are so variegated, so strikingly new, so dewy fresh and yet so apt that they linger on the reader's mental screen even when his eyes glide forward on the text of the novel. The reader remains spellbound with his mouth agape, wondering why he did not think of them! An image is not simply a yoking together of two similar ideas. Some of Arundhati Roy's images also serve the purpose of creating an atmosphere appropriate for the corresponding action. Her poetic passages, mythical allusions, and rich and evocative imagery are commendable for their artistic effect (R. Bhargavi 2002: 107). Shakespeare used animal imagery in *Othello* to provide the general atmosphere of cruelty, deceit, and evil in the world. In *Hamlet*, the images of disease and death create such an atmosphere. The novel has some of the devices used in a cinematic technique with episodes, flashbacks, and flash-forwards largely because it is viewed through the eyes of a seven-year-old child, Rahel. Such a narrative is bound to remain raw, honest and as repetitive, slow and fragmentary as children in their immaturity do not always exercise control over their thoughts and imagination. Ammu, as the connection between the *Heart of Darkness* and the *History House* is a failure in her own world, as a wife, a daughter, and mother. First, she is betrayed by Baba, whom she marries in Calcutta by sheer wrong judgment. Baba is not handsome or intelligent or responsible, as she wants him to be. The failure of her marriage is symbolic of the lack of domestic support.

Keywords: Postcolonial, transgression, hegemony hybridity, Shakespeare, .etc

Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* is a typical Postcolonial text, as the basis of her imagination is the idea of Postcoloniality. Within this ambiance of the Postmodernist world, there are the ideas of transgression, hegemony hybridity, and mimicry. This is a difficult recitation, where the issues of the Orient, (that is, Said's Orient), the question of Feminist affirmation (or the lack of it), patriarchy and finally the important aspect, the question of the subaltern are the critical issues which Arundhati Roy's Postmodernist art discusses. According to Pier Paolo Picicco, like Faulkner, Roy has forged her literary universe in *The God of Small Things* out of the experience and from her own "postage stamp of native soil" (2004: 328). This is the legitimate conflict between the Catholic Syrian family (genetically beginning with the Blessing of Roy) consisting of Papachi, Mammachi, Beachy Kochamma, Cheko, Margaret Kochamma, their daughter, Sophie Mol and finally Ammu and her two kids, Estha and Rahel. As the discourse is about the multiculturalism between Ammu and Velutha, other issues like transgression and caste and incest are fore-grounded.

For in *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne gives very little of the life or opinions of Tristram Shandy but writes passages upon passages with his playful imagination on things all and sundry not even remotely related to the main plot, such as, flies, zigzag lines and even blank pages with liberal sprinklings of philosophical reflections disregarding the fact whether critics consider them as digressions or inseparable parts of the novel. Faulkner devised a method of telling the story of the fall of the Compson family through four different narrators and their viewpoints; consequently, the story moves back and forth both in time and in space. Using the stream-of-consciousness technique, Faulkner makes the novel so rich that the reader becomes a diver who explores the unfathomable depth of the novel and enriches himself in each successive attempt. Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* has something of Laurence Sterne, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and William Faulkner in introducing a lot of extraneous material which is not the organic part of the novel. In adopting the stream-of-consciousness technique in *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy makes the stories of the novel so tempting, so teasing, so satisfying and occasionally frustrating too.

God of Small Things offers a critique of the dynamics of India's sociological realities in the contemporary context. According to O. P. Mathur, Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* is a glorification of life in its variety of forms, sounds, smell colours, and movements... all-suffusing us with wonder. (2001: 119) The setting is Kerala in an imaginary place called, Ayemenem. It is about the dialectics of the conflict between the Catholic Syrians and Paravans. Velutha, the Paravan in the novel, who is the God of Small Things is also the god of loss. He lives in the History House, which is the archetypal representation of the seamy side of the Indian social system. Ammu's relationship (she is a Catholic Syrian touchable) with Velutha is the nerve center of the action. Arundhati Roy, by mapping this social abrogation of social values by Ammu is the narrative intention. Within this cauldron of the social life, Ammu's dizygotic (two-egg) twins called Rahel and Hesta provide the connection of the History House with the Heart of Darkness, that is Ayemenem. Ammu's divorced

husband called, Chako (Ammu's brother) Margaret Kochamma, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, and Sophie Mol are the participants in this social dynamics, as this narrative examines India's cultural transformation from the Colonial, Postcolonial period to the contemporary era of globalization. Read from this trajectory, the novel represents to us the cross elements of Indian culture and the broken, minor cultural others that require our deep concern. This novel focuses on two issues: (1) the influence of the caste system in postcolonial India and investigates the cultural conflicts/differences in relation to the recitation of distress, history, and indiscretion; (2) Roy's appropriation of the imperial language, the discursive form and modes of representation of the novel. Overall, this novel aims to explore the "possibilities" within and ahead of the after colonial subcontinent of India by listening to the heterogeneous voices of its peoples. Among the characters in the novel, Velutha is well-known because his shaded body/status signifies the cultural differences of India from other nations. The narration of Velutha reveals the inter-weaned relationship between caste and social divisions in India. Yet the transgression amid Velutha and Ammu facades confronts to the traditional standards and social hierarchy of India. Moreover, Rahel and Estha's transgression brings out issues of hybridity, gender oppression, social taboo, and incest. Apart from these characters, the recitation of the ordeal is from Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Chacko. The traumatic memories of the Ipe family remind us of India's distress of colonization. The History House, which is a place holding small events and traumatic memories, is also the irked house of her-stories. By dwelling on the small things that happened to the Ipe family, Roy actually is inquiring the erection of empire, the lingering effects of colonialism and the global order in flux. In this way, Roy's novel reveals to us the possibilities of dismantling the Western codes and performing postcolonial insurrection through the progression of literary decolonization. In this study of *The God of Small Things*, Indian multiculturalism is the central concern. On the one hand, Roy as a Postcolonial female writer takes advantage of the imperial language to render views in constructing anti-colonial texts.

Arundhati Roy's images in *The God of Small Things* are so variegated, so strikingly new, so dewy fresh and yet so apt that they linger on the reader's mental screen even when his eyes glide forward on the text of the novel. The reader remains spellbound with his mouth agape, wondering why he did not think of them! An image is not simply a yoking together of two similar ideas. Behind each image lies hidden a process somewhat involuntary and spontaneous in which an idea, an object, a character ignites the imagination of an author to form an appropriate image. Bergson had aptly pointed out that a person, while observing a thing or thinking of an idea, unconsciously finds a similar object or idea in the storehouse of his memory. Depending upon the richness of knowledge and the fertility of one's imagination, the similarity between two objects or ideas could be short or an extended one. It is the articulation of such a similarity which forms an image. In Arundhati Roy, the images are not always quick and short, like small firecrackers, but extended ones, what heroic or epic similes were in the hands of poets like Milton. Roy finds silence hung in the air like a secret loss(91). When Baby Kochamma and Rahel talk about Estha the silence sat between grand-

niece and baby grandaunt like a third person (21). Rain becomes slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, plowing it up like gunfire and the old house on the hill wears its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low heat (1). Inspector Thomas Matthew, considering Ammu a Vaishya, a prostitute, tapped her breasts with his baton, gently, tap, tap. As though he was opting mangoes from a vat, pointing out the ones he wanted to be packed and delivered (8). Describing the march of thousands of people, Arundhati Roy refers to the sound of a thousand voices spread over the frozen traffic like a Noise Umbrella (65) but in which holes were pierced by steel shrill police whistles. In the doctor's clinic, the sluggish fan sliced the bulky, frightened air into an unending spiral that spun slowly to the floor like the peeled skin of an endless potato. (132) The images tell their own stories of the writer's quick reflexes, of her widespread concerns, of her highly imaginative and inventive mind. The images have wonderfully, deftly, yet delicately been used for describing an action, depicting certain manners, elucidating a feature of a personality, or portraying a trait of a character, and by doing so, the images open a window that lets us peep into the inside of a character.

Sometimes Roy uses a word or an expression like a seed which grows, as the novel progresses, into a bush or a tree and it is only in the second or subsequent readings of the novel that one rediscovers what the seed was like. According to R.K. Srivastava, her language has the lyrical quality of prose (2002: 106). This could be said of the image of a frog. In the beginning, to Ammu, her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other's company, lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic. Entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs. (43) The image of frogs is extended to the image of dead frogs. This is noticed by Ammu as well as her children but to each one of them, it has different associations. For Rahel, the dead frog was so dead and squashed so flat that it looked more like a frog-shaped stain on the road than a frog. (82) The stain is then associated with Miss Mitten who was killed by the milk truck. Rahel and Estha are compared first to frogs, then to the squashed crows that had tried to eat the squashed frogs and so on. When Rahel was a child, she had spotted Velutha in a crowd shouting slogans over which Ammu had become angry and had perspired. Years later in New York, Rahel wonders why did Ammu become angry when Velutha was spotted and then she reflects over it: That expression on Ammu's face. Like a rogue piece in a puzzle. Like a question mark and drifted through the pages of a book and never settled at the end of a sentence. That marble look in Ammu's eyes. The glisten of perspiration on her upper lip. And the chill of that sudden hurt silence. (72) The images make the reasons quite clear to the reader when he knows of the relationship between and Velutha.

Some of Arundhati Roy's images also serve the purpose of creating an atmosphere appropriate for the corresponding action. Her poetic passages, mythical allusions, and rich and evocative imagery are commendable for their artistic effect (R. Bhargavi 2002: 107). Shakespeare used animal imagery in Othello to provide the general atmosphere of cruelty,

deceit, and evil in the world. In Hamlet, the images of disease and death create such an atmosphere. Dieter Riemenschneider points out to a similar function of Arundhati Roy's imagery in *The God of Small Things*. The imagery of sickness and disease is also of filth and stench significantly but ironically show how a tourist resort named 'God's Own Country' negates its very meaning because it is a purely man-made business venture set up at the expense of nature and people; of the river, its fishermen and the villages of Ayemenem. According to Arundhati Roy, human relationships and the divisions between human beings are more brutal and straight forward than those in cities. (Salon interview with Roy, 30th Sept. 1997). The Meenachal River greets Rahel "with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed. (124) Chappu Thamburan, the spider, was given rubbish as its camouflage. It adapts itself to its surroundings, acquires a new camouflage and survives while Velutha fails to do so. Pappachi, the Imperial Entomologist, worked on moths; but his assistant fraudulently claims an award on the discovery of a new moth. Ammu was reluctant to return to the dining table where the conversation circled like a moth around the white child. (157) Ammu moved through the darkness like an insect following a chemical trail (332). Rahel is like an excited mosquito on a leash (98). On Ammu's death, A platoon of ants carried a dead cockroach sedately through the door, demonstrating what should be done with corpses. (162) These images are quite evocative and create an atmosphere appropriate for the impending tragedy.

The heart of the narrative is the History House and Velutha and its proximity to the Heart of Darkness symbolically represented through the Ayemenem House by Ammu. This is a critical issue in the narrative, where the issues of hegemony and hybridity and transgression arise. The relationship between Ammu (of the Heart of Darkness) and Velutha (the History House) ends in tragedy, even with the separation of Ammu's two children, Estha and Rahel. Heart of Darkness is a decadent signifier of a deadened and ossified cultural system. In a similar way, the History House is a cultural legacy of India's social stratification. As all the characters in the Heart of Darkness, Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma (in particular) are believers in the status quo. Chacko is liberated from the shackles of orthodoxy by his marriage with Margaret, the English woman. It is Ammu's relationship with Velutha that is the heart of the matter of the novel. Velutha is *The God of Small Things*. According to O. P. Mathur, Velutha is transcended into a supernatural Being (2001:117). He lives in the History House, which is symbolically separated by the river called Meenachal. The History House is rendered in mystery and grotesque details. It is introduced through the story of Karisaiyappu's Ghost. Velutha's father is Vellyappa. He is a symbol of accepting the suffering of discrimination.

The novel has some of the devices used in a cinematic technique with episodes, flashbacks, and flash-forwards largely because it is viewed through the eyes of a seven-year-old child, Rahel. Such a narrative is bound to remain raw, honest and as repetitive, slow and

fragmentary as children in their immaturity do not always exercise control over their thoughts and imagination. The action in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* has been viewed through the eyes of an illiterate old lady, Achakka, and naturally has some of these traits, but what makes her narrative so singular, so distinguishably representative is that her voice has the elemental simplicity, a pleasant fragrance of her genuine feelings and an unalloyed ring of truth that one finds in Rahel's narrative. It slips back and forth, shuttles between the past and the present at such a puzzling pace as does the conversation of a child. Even Nayantara Sahgal (1997:125) confesses, Often I could not understand whether we were in the past or the present. This is what Arundhati Roy does. In telling the story of the God of Small Things and other beings, she also tells the stories of her own childhood, her home, and her meadows. Ayemenem is believed to be Aymanam, Arundhati Roy's hometown in Kottayam district of Kerala. Ammu echoes in some way the well-known woman activist Mary Ro. The graphic details of child abuse, as well as the children's activities, point a finger at Arundhati Roy's won childhood experiences. That certain Communist leaders in Kerala are what they have been portrayed to be in the novel is already a matter of legal and public debate.

If the Kathakali man sends the story up like a bubble, he wrestles it to the ground and lets it go again, Arundhati Roy, too, flies the story of the novel like a kite, taking it thousands of years back, long before the Marxists came. Before the British received Malabar, before the Dutch dominance, before Vasco de Gama Arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut, it could be argued that it began long before (33) Roy can fly it in space by taking the action of the novel to the United States where Rahel takes up a job or to the United Kingdom where Chacko becomes a Rhodes Scholar and marries Margaret. With a deft tug, Roy could bring the story back to the present in Ayemenem and then dash it to the ground. Like the Kathakali man, Arundhati Roy can fly you across the whole world in minutes. For Dieter Riemenschneider (1999:128) Arundhati Roy's narrative technique breaks up the linear time sequence of the story and mingles and combines present, past and future, memories, dreams, and allusive foresight as effortlessly as it shifts from one point of view to another. She teases and punishes the story. She laughs and plays with it, and through this process writes of the suggest of sorrow that happiness contains as well as the hidden fish of shame in a sea of glory.

Here Arundhati Roy used the method of inter-textuality describes Ammu's story through a song from the film called *Chemen*. In this song also a girl from one social situation is forced to marry a fisherman from a neighboring beach, though she loves someone else. As the fisherman realizes that his wife has a lover before their marriage, he tries to meet him but dies in the process. However, both the lovers make a suicide pact and die by drowning themselves in the sea. Thus, everybody dies in this film, which is similar to the story of Ammu and Velutha, as they perish in the cultural conflict. In the very first chapter of the novel, most of the characters and their stories, including those of Ammu and of Rahel, have been introduced

but without the jumbling up of disparate elements as is occasionally found in Tristram Shandy and in *Midnight's Children*. Two threads that bind all the stories together are the hollow ideals of the Ayemenem House and the presence or absence of socially approved or disapproved love. Each story is so formed that it replays the previous one or foreshadows the succeeding one. Mammachi's illusive marital happiness extends to the next two generations of the Ayemenem House in the form of failures of Annu's and Rahel's marriages. The assertion of pappachi's patriarchy and male-chauvinism continues in Chacko's case. The divorces of Ammu and Rahel echo Chacko's. If Ammu returns home after a brief taste of marriage, so does Rahel. The events of the past take place again as if replaying the history of the Ayemenem House. Thus, the stories of the novel, like the Kathakali stories, have no secrets in the real sense because what happens to the characters in one generation continues essentially in the succeeding ones. And yet the individualized, distinct entities of characters and the vastly diversified details make these stories so attractive that one could say of them, as is said of the Kathakali stories, which you have heard and want to hear again. The unhappiness of Mammachi's marital life and the circumstances governing her generation are so different from those of Ammu and of Rahel that she could not have dreamt of attempting what the other two so impulsively decided and executed. Nevertheless, the narration of the stories is such that the reader could begin with Rahel's and then go back to Ammu's and to Mammachi's even if they happen to be two generations in the past. The pathetic and foreshadows Rahel's. And what happens to them is what happens in every house, every village, every town and even in every part of the world. It is this universality which, like the Kathakali stories, makes the stores as "familiar as the house you live in.

Ammu's two children, Estha and Rahel are drawn to Velutha from the beginning. Estha and Velutha believe that Velutha is a good companion to them. Velutha also shows interest to protect these children. Velutha's relationship with these children is a case of cultural plurality, without erasing the boundaries. Perhaps, Arundhati Roy's portrayal of Velutha through Kathakali dance is the most effective Postcolonial device to foreground the cultural and social dialectics of India. In this Kathakali dance, Arundhati Roy writes further about the Kathakali stories: To the Kathakali Man, these tales are his kids and his infancy. He has grown up within them. They are his portholes and his means of seeing. So when he tells a story, he handles it as he is a child of his own. He taunts it. He penalizes it. He sends it up like a bubble. He wrestles it to the ground and lets it move again. He chuckles at it because he loves it. He can fly you across whole worlds in minutes; he can stop for hours to test wilting leaf. Or play with a sleeping monkey's tail. He can turn effortlessly from the carnage of war into the felicity of a woman rinsing her hair in a mountain brook. It is the story of the birth and life of Karna and his mother Kunti who betrays him. Though the story is well known to all Indians, Arundhati Roy gives it a contemporary relevance by making Karna (like Velutha in this novel) self-betrayed by society and history. Though Arundhati Roy does not alter the details, the meaning of the tragic tale of Karna in Mahabharata, she appears to question the legitimacy of Arjuna's prowess. Velutha and Karna are shown to be the typical Postcolonial

figures outside the pale of history. Arundhati Roy also raises the question of feminine affirmation through the story of Kunti. Thus, Arundhati Roy made it subtle through the story of Kunti and Karna the issues of India's social and cultural hegemony.

Velutha is realized as a fulfilled human being as his love-story suggests a history of the creation and the evolution of the universe and the moral and emotional foundations of mankind. Chaco tells the twins about the Earth Woman's life of forty-six years of Geological Time in terms of which the span of their whole lives is just a twinkle in her eye- an expression which the twins do not like, for the word twinkle had happy edges not justified in their lives. Similarly, the arrest of Velutha by the police in front of the twins makes the novelist comment that the policemen were only history's henchmen and that: It was human history, masquerading as God's purpose.

The love story of the novel thus has ironically a framework of Death, the arrival and the drowning of Sophie Mol. But that two is enclosed within the vast pattern of Earth Woman's life. The story really began when the Love Laws were made. And how much (p.33). Rahel and Estha had known each other before life began (p.327)

The fact that they were twins may be a suggestion, approaching the Biblical story of Genesis, that in the womb of time man and women were one and that the difference between the sexes and its consciousness came much later. An individual's life is like a bubble, which shimmers for a moment and then bursts and merges with the primordial once again like Estha who is a great bubble floating in the sea of noise.

The objects of nature and the lower creation too, seen from a perspective of wonder, amusement, irony, and sympathy, are portrayed as alive, active, moody and suffering, suggestive of nature is on a par with humanity, as fragile in its loveliness as mankind is. They are all indistinguishable aspects of life in the mysterious universe which the novelist more than once calls, are Conrad, the Heart of Darkness. But the novelist dislikes the inroads of man into pristine nature whose effervescent charm he degenerates. He tries to get more rice for the price of a river (p.124), which, though it once had the power to evoke fear, is now just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea (p.124). And it smells of shit hovers over Ayemenem like a hat (p.125). He, like all living creatures, even houses, is like hole in the universe, his Dark of Harness tiptoeing into Heart of Darkness (p.212), he plays his puppet role symbolically punctuated by the drum-beat of dum dum first heard by the family at Abhilash Talkies and then recurring in the mind of Estha ever since, giving the impression that it is alan insignificant play of which the Director is the power above.

The insignificance and smallness of mankind are well brought out in the description of a crowd at a railway station, which incidentally is also a comment on the huge and increasing population of the country.

After her marriage, her Small God laughed a hollow laugh and skipped away cheerfully (p.19). But she has yet to find the God of Small Thing. As, and her released spirit moving across the barriers of time, attempts to discover this God in long drawn-out narrative discourse and herself, her family and whatever else comes within her ken.

Velutha character is fore-grounded as a symbolic deliverer of the narrative meaning. He is shown to a paravan, with a difference. His intelligence and technical prowess are fully recognized in the Paradise fickle factory in the Heart of Darkness. His engineering skill is admired and made use of by Chako and in the Paradise fickle factory. His relationship with a communist party is also significant. Thus, his technical prowess and his political awareness make him a complete character. However, History makes him a failed God. Arundhati Roy by deconstructing the signifiers of the Heart of Darkness is portraying the Postcolonial ambivalence of the narrative.

Ammu, as the connection between the Heart of Darkness and the History House is a failure in her own world, as a wife, a daughter, and mother. First, she is betrayed by Baba, whom she marries in Calcutta by sheer wrong judgment. Baba is not handsome or intelligent or responsible, as she wants him to be. The failure of her marriage is symbolic of the lack of domestic support. Ammu's story is a typical Postcolonial story of a woman, who supposedly deviates from the norms. She goes all the way from Kottayam to Calcutta as a form of feminine freedom, only to tragically returned home as a failure of her desire for independence. To this extent, both she and Velutha are victims of gender and racial hegemony. As Ammu transgresses the norm in her relationship with Velutha, who is also a victim of hegemony, Arundhati Roy is questioning the legitimacy of the 'norm'. as Heart of Darkness and History House are both irrelevant in a globalized context, Arundhati Roy is fore-grounding the question of continuity of the norm. Thus, the transgression of the norm both by Velutha and Ammu is a way of legitimizing the story of Karna and Kunti in a Postcolonial reality.

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