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*The God of Small Things: A Study in Memory*

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## *The God of Small Things: A Study in Memory*

### Abstract

It is difficult to catagaorise *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. The story of the book is neither a comedy, nor a tragedy, nor history, nor romance. There is turmoil and passion and humour and pain. In spite of all this it is a story about ordinary people leading ordinary lives. But as one lays the book down the spirit that comes shining through masks the ordinariness and “somehow marries the deepest, smallest personal emotions with an epic narrative”<sup>i</sup> Arundhati Roy herself points out: “Little events, ordinary things smashed and reconstituted, Imbued with a new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of story” (Roy 32)<sup>ii</sup>

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The little town in Kerala is the setting Arundhati Roy has chosen for her novel *The God of Small Things*. In this little town there is a little street of suburban homes surrounded by lush equatorial vegetation.

“Her setting is real homespun: this slumbering town of Ayemenen which becomes a Malgudi....”<sup>iii</sup>

A young woman of thirty who has just returned from America after having divorced her American husband, Larry McCaslin is the heroin of this heart-warming novel. The novel has various themes which like the different threads mingle with other themes in the length of the novel. In one of her interview the novelist herself has pointed out....

“The book is about the level of boundaries between parents and children, touchables and untouchables, life and death. And also about the transgression of these boundaries and how one can break with these conventions, about leaving home and returning home- we all wish to return home; also the fact that there are no guilty or innocent beings for we are all accomplices.”<sup>iv</sup> (Roy, Sunday Times 17)

India has a very shameful caste system still prevalent and with these broad parameters Arundhati Roy has dealt with and about which Updike says:

“Occidental readers who imagined that untouchability was banished by Mahatama Gandhi will find the caste onus cruelly operative in 1969”<sup>v</sup> (158)

The novel has also reference to women’s status in society – especially a divorced daughter’s rights in her paternal home where she has no *locus standi*. Glimpse of Indian torn by political strife is also presented in the novel. Communities play havoc so that the late “Marxist leader E.M.S.Namboodiriped accused Roy of mingling facts”<sup>vi</sup>

There is also a backward-looking Anglophilia which sometimes gets carried to ridiculous extent. There is one thread run through the novel is the past, it concerns memories of the past. Major character of the novel lives in the past. As Updike points it.

“Roy takes her time exploring the past by means of present”<sup>vii</sup>



Roy has also used flashback technique in the novel. She began in the present, moved into the past for its greater part, and back into the present. Bit by bit past is uncovered, stripping off layers after layer till the story, the characters, and their relationships with each other lie exposed before the reader.

Rahel, the protagonist has the strongest thread of memory. After a gap of twenty years she has returned to Ayemenem, her native town. Roy has given us an account of her thoughts and impression of her first day of the return to her home. In a period of twenty-four hours she recedes and advances and then recedes again till these twenty years unfolds before us. Rahel lives in the bitter-sweet memories of past life:

“In those amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginning and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Esthappen and Rahel ththought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually as We or Us.” (Roy 2)<sup>viii</sup>

Rahel finds ordinary things evoking powerful memories in her when she goes round the familiar house. Memory lay in....

“Coat hangers, tomatoes. In the tar on the roads. In certain colours. In the plates of restaurant. In the absence of words. And the emptiness in eyes.” (Roy 55)<sup>ix</sup>

Smells, like music, held memories, “She breathed deep and bottled it for posterity.” (Roy 99)<sup>x</sup> The Meenachal river, which greets the grown-up Rahel evokes nostalgic memories of the same river where the twins had learnt to swim. The river greets the grown-up Rahel with

“a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from hospital bed” (Roy 124)<sup>xi</sup>

Here Chacko had taught them to swim (splashing around his ample uncle stomach without help) ....

“Here they had learnt to fish. To thread coiling purple earth-warms onto hooks on the fishing rods that Velutha made from slender culms of yellow bamboo.” (Roy 203)<sup>xii</sup>

Rahel has also memories of Ammu, the twin’s mother. It is tinted with kindness and deep love bordering on devotion:



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“She had a delicate chiseled, face, black eyebrows, straight nose and luminous nut brown skin.... Sometimes she was the most beautiful woman that Estha and Rahel had ever seen.” (Roy 45)<sup>xiii</sup>

The twins Rahel and Estha had touching and heart breaking relationship with their mother. They seem to be wrapped up in the mother. It brings the childhood memories overflowing back for each of us. A simple activity like “putting her (Rahel’s) mouth on Ammu’s stomach and sucking at it” All Rahel’s memories of her mother are not sweet. The heart-rendingly tragic description of Ammu’s funeral is also in her memory. When Ammu is consumed by electric crematorium, its runs in Rahel’s memory like this:

“She was their Ammu and their Baba and she had loved them Double”  
(Roy 163)<sup>xiv</sup>

There are also nostalgic evocation of the boat—“The boat that Estha sat on and Rahel found” – and, above all, Velutha, the untouchable, the God of Small Things, Rahel recalls how Velutha would call Estha endearingly by the name of Esthapappychen, Kuttappen Peter Mon:

“And that become a delighted, breathless, Rumpelstiltskin-like dance among the rubber trees.

“Oh Esthapappychen, Kuttappen Peter Mon,

Where, Oh where have your gone?

And from Rumpelstiltskin it graduated to the Scarlet Pimpernel.

“We seek him here, we seek him there.

Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.

Is he in heaven? Is he in hell?

That dammedel – usive Estha – pen? (Roy 183)<sup>xv</sup>

The warmth and understanding of Velutha is stressed in lyrical prose. The memories of the horrible treatment meted out to Velutha by the police had completely shattered Estha and it gives rise to the most



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sickeningly painful memories in Rahel. Velutha gives rise to the most endearing and entertaining memories in her. Reviewers of the book have found him “demented”<sup>9</sup> and dysfunctional”<sup>10</sup> Estha decides not to utter any other word after a lie and it is the memory of that lie that haunts Estha all his life. The policemen wanted to know whether Velutha had kidnapped the children. Baby Kochamma had impressed it upon him that if he did not lie, Ammu would perish in jail for the rest of her life. So Estha lied and said, “Yes”. That was the end of his childhood and the end of innocence and the end of speech:

“Childhood tiptoed out,

Silence slid in like a bolt.” (Roy 338)<sup>xvi</sup>

That was “the end of living” for all three means for Estha for his twin Rahel and for their mother Ammu.

Baby Kochamma also lives in the past. She had fallen deeply in love with Father Mulligan, the Syrian Christian priest. She feels that only that part of her life in which she was associated with him seems to be meaningful to her. No doubt for a while the family car and her garden engaged her attention. But when she took up television she dropped both the car and the garden simultaneously. Her real identity lay in her unrequited love for Father Mulligan who was long since dead. She had been unable to possess him in life, but “in her memory of him he embraced her” (Roy 298)<sup>xvii</sup> During the day she was “determined not to let the past creep her” (Roy 29),<sup>xviii</sup> but every night her entries in her diary began with the same words: “I love you” (Roy 297)<sup>xix</sup>

The past is so alluring for Pappachi. He wore a three-piece suit and his gold pocket watch even after retirement and in the stifling heat of Ayemenem. He kept....

“ a picture of himself as a young man, with his hair slicked down taken in photographer’s studio in Vienna” (Roy 49)<sup>xx</sup>

Those had been glorious days for him. One day the moth fell into his drink and it was the brightest glory and the biggest curse, both for him and his family. He had decided that the moth which fell into his drink was a rare species and he wished it to be named after him. This incident was the brightest glory. But authorities disappointed him by identifying it as an unusual race of a known species. It became the curse.

“But the real blow came when twelve years later.... It was decided that Pappachi’s moth was in fact a separate species....” (Roy 49)<sup>xxi</sup>



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It was the worst thing when it was named after Pappachi's successor, a junior whom Pappachi had always disliked. He felt cheated and the memory of having been cheated out of his rightful honour tormented him all his life.

“it tormented him and his children and his children's children” (Roy  
49)<sup>xxii</sup>

The novel looks at the past through the eyes of the present and explores the joyous and ugly side of both. It suggests that most of the characters are drifters or live in the past. The memory takes the reader on a long journey of over twenty years in the lives of characters. Relations come crowding as the memories unspool themselves.



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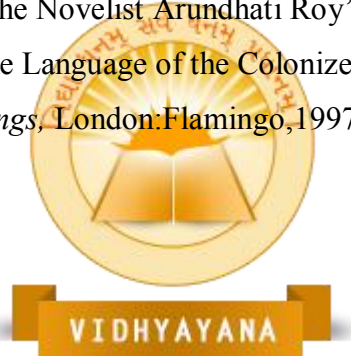
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