

Research Paper

The Booker Prize Winning Novel of Arundhati Roy : 'The God of Small Things'

Vice Prin. Dr. S. D. Sindkhedkar

heads the Department of English Lang. and Lit.
& contributes to the PG Courses of PSGVPM's Arts,
Science & Commerce College & The Advanced Study
Centre of English and Indian Languages, Shahada (M.S.).

(The Booker Prize award in 1998 for Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things' opened up a new opportunity for the novelist to turn her attentions to India's nuclear policy and the campaign against the Narmada dam projects, for which she earned the label "write activist". What does this signify? Is Roy a new-style global international intellectual/activist? This article first places the writer within the context of "development journalism" in India, then assesses Roy's publication outlets, and the nature of activism as expressed in her writing in the light of the concept of the new international public sphere Roy's aim is to influence internationally, and her writing has provoked considerable response on the Internet. To this extent, Roy is contributing internationally to what promoters of the significance of the medium have described as a "multi-discursive public sphere" but this article questions whether we should accept the term "new international public sphere".)

By 1999 Arundhati Roy had followed up the Booker prize winning *The God of Small Things* with involvement in the campaign against the Narmada dam projects, which earned her the label of "writer-activist". Roy's skills as a fictional author have enabled her to produce a reflexive, personalized style of journalistic writing which invites the reader to share in her process of discovery: an approach that encourages support for activism. According to Roy, the activist label derives from the fact that she takes sides in her essays: "I have a point of view. What's worse, I make it clear that I think it's right and moral to take that position and what's even worse, use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position." Whilst acknowledging that this approach "skates uncomfortably close to the territory occupied by political party ideologues", she differentiates her approach thus: "when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolute ideology against another, but as a storyteller who wants to share her way of seeing." There is no reason, she claims, why writers should be ambiguous, for intellectuals and artists "will be called upon to take sides" in the future, and to ask themselves some difficult questions about "corporate globalization". According to Roy this concept "has to do with boring things like water supply, electricity, irrigation. But it also has to do with a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has few parallels in history."

Arundhati Roy, the author of *The God of Small Things*, describes her book as "not about history but biology and transgression. And, the fact is that you can never understand the nature of brutality until you see what has been loved being smashed. And so the book deals with both things—it deals with our ability to be brutal as well as our ability to be so deeply intimate and so deeply loving." Roy's book certainly is about love—the love and loyalty that is felt between a pair of dizygotic (two-egg) twins, who consider themselves to be two parts of the same individual, and their mother Ammu whose love and care allows her to act as both mother and father for the twins. This love sustains the family

until the twins' visiting English cousin dies from an accidental drowning which, in addition to other tragic occurrences, leads to shocking and destructive consequences for all of the individuals involved. As we see the relationship between the twins and Ammu, we are given a vivid picture of life in a small Indian town, as well as an idea of the Indian caste system, abusive governments, subversion of cultures, and hypocrisy. The reader is presented all of this information from the perspective of the twins in the 1960s and in the 1990s, so we are able to witness the events as they happen and then gain insight into how the twins have coped throughout the years and attempted to make lives for themselves despite the tragedies through which they have lived.

Set in Kerala during the late 1960s when communism rattled the age-old caste system, *The God of Small Things* begins with the funeral of young Sophie Mol, the cousin of the novel's protagonists Rahel and her fraternal twin brother, Estha. In a circuitous and suspense-filled narrative, it is a story of decadence of a family with a hoary past, trapped in a time bubble (the time on the painted face of child Rahel's watch always reads "ten to two"). The bubble is tossed like a yo-yo by the great surge of events, ready to burst any moment. Nevertheless this steady, mechanical and almost pre-ordained process of withering, stirs up great passions, with its attendant ironies and pathos. In the end, we have a classic with a tragic grandeur, albeit of small things! "A story is a simple way of presenting a complex world and in my book I have tried to create a complete world carefully with craft and detail," clarifies Arundhati Roy, the author while talking to media persons. Things unfold in the Ayemenem House, now mossy, soaky and dusty, but once the symbol of pride for the Syrian Christian clan. Here, the characters inch towards their doomed destinies. Things culminate with the arrival of Sophie Mol with her mother Margaret Kochamma, to visit her 'biological father,' Chacko. A stealthy jaunt, masterminded by her cousins Estha and Rahel, climaxes in her death by drowning. This incident, along with the exposed rendezvous of Ammu, the divorced daughter of the house with an low caste menial, lets loose all kinds of passions, rage, trickery and madness. Expulsions, separations and deaths follow, turning the place to a phantom of its old glory. The old house had a fatal attraction about it. Every character returned there -- defeated, deserted and drained by the big, bad world, where they had dispersed earlier. The parallel here is all too discernible to miss -- of the returning Malayalees from their "unhappy" working places in the Gulf. But once back to Ayemenem House, the characters are trapped -- just like the small bird in the Plymouth, which, unable to find a way out of the car, dies there. All these, seen through the innocent eyes of Estha and Rahel, give a coat of freshness to the narrative. The children's perspective, apart from the overdose of similes and contrived usages, sustain the readers' interests in the small things Lenin, the young son of communist schemer K N M Pillai, for instance, is

described as 'dressed like a taxi' because of his yellow shirt and black pants. Arundhati Roy's super sensitive antenna catches all the tiny details of her landscape -- and the thick, wet Kerala countryside has plenty to offer. The 'farting slush' does not escape her, nor does the 'funnel cap' created by mosquitoes over people's heads. It is not the story element of *The God of Small Things* that is its strong point, but the language. The language characterized by a strange cadence -- plenty of capitals, joined words and phrases, pranky childish distortions -- supports the jerky unfolding of the story. The narration too is not linear but moves back and forth in time, each chapter briefly touching upon what has gone before or what is in store. These techniques pervade the whole story, even in describing the poignant moments like Ammu's cremation, Estha's separation from his mother and his witnessing the police interrogation. "My thoughts and language are the same things," says Arundhati Roy in an interview. "The book is not based on research, but is about some very raw, private things. It is more about human biology than human history ---- our nature is capable of extreme brutality, extreme love," she adds. As she rightly said, *The God of Small Things* was 'a work of instinct.' She was not searching for a story, 'the narrative and the structure slowly revealed itself and the book was written 'sentence by sentence.' Therefore, the reader realizes very soon that he can't skip over passages: every sentence has to be read and reread to get the flavor of her prose.

Roy's mastery of metaphor and creativity in wordplay may just be among the best in the English language today. In *The God of Small Things* she tells a haunting tragedy in hauntingly beautiful prose that borders on poetry. Almost every scene painted itself visibly in my mind, but in particular I find myself dwelling on the Orange drink Lemon drink Man, and on the airport scene: Ambassadors E. Pelvis and S. Insect; Rahel wrapping herself in the dirty curtain to escape the reeling changes in her life. I'm so impressed by Roy's ability to see a child's-eye view of the world, and it's so easy to believe that Rahel and Estha would assume that "love had been reapportioned." It's also a remarkable achievement in non-linear storytelling for a first-time novelist.

"May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month," and so is Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. Imagine a cold piece of butter slowly melting in a frying pan, setting the scene for the cooking to come, and you can see the way Roy's prose works. Words that are hot and brooding reel you into an intricate web of family politics and social mores, evoking a feeling similar to a written stream of consciences. Roy writes in layers, except that the layers are both added and taken off; I was reminded of my childhood when I would eat wafer chocolates from the bottom and the top, leaving the middle until last, because that was the best part. Roy kindly dispels the, often torturous, anxiety of what happens in the end early on in the book. The reader is told what happened before it happened, what happened after it happened, and saves what happened for last. A format that seemingly would put off a reader becomes its most appreciated quality. This book is for everyone; murder mystery, love story, epic saga all in one. Even if you're not the romantic type, the social scrutiny of Indian customs provides for interesting reading. However, if you're interested in brain candy, forget it. There is too much to absorb. Emotion and intellect are needed in order to understand the emotion and intellect that are related. You could take in only what is superficially presented, as the plot alone is worthwhile, but you would be missing so much. Rahel, a dizygotic twin returns to the place of her childhood and subsequently a place of unhappiness to see her brother,

the other twin, after more than twenty years of separation. Esta, the brother, has stopped talking, and Rahel has stopped feeling. Their reunion allows for the remembrance and grieving of their disastrous youths. They recall small things, seemingly unimportant, yet vital to the reconstruction of their sense of inner peace. They are the same age as their mother when she died, thirty-one. Their house is run down and the only relatives left from the monster in their pasts are, in essence, only waiting to die. Entering their minds through an omniscient voice, we are transported back and forth in time, remembering small things, painting a big picture. We remember a cousin's accidental death, and the death of another who served as a scapegoat. We remember how fate can make the strangest families. We also remember Rahel and Esta, and how they "broke the love laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much." While the novel serves to shock the reader from time to time, the pace is slow. Roy's style would be described as somewhat verbose for the impatient, yet serves to parallel the way we deal with emotions, hurt, and love in life. Creating a paradox however, this reader went back to re-absorb certain elements of beauty or truth, due to a lack of time created by an impatience to find out what happens next. Although usually overly critical of fiction, I would recommend this book for anyone who likes to read intelligent literature. It gives the reader a chance to realize how profound those small things really are.

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- Ref.:**
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