

THE SHIFTING SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC ETHOS IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

SAMJY MATHEW

Abstract : The God of Small Things (1997) narrates the shifting ethos of India in the typical Kerala background. Through the saga of a Syrian Christian family, the novelist narrates the social evils such as patriarchy, caste system etc., and the responses of the Chappu Thamburans (insignificant creatures) to them. Apart from subjection of the 'Laltains', the gods of losses try to bring transformation to a certain extent in the society by upholding individuality and freedom.

Keywords: Ethos, subjection, patriarchalism, marriage, woman.

God of Small Things, the debut novel of Arundhati Roy was published in 1997 and won the prestigious Booker Prize. It is the saga of a Syrian Christian family at Ayemenem (in pre-independent language: central Travancore) in Kerala. The story has a dynamic evolution, which speaks about the shifting social, political and economic ethos of Kerala in particular and of India in general. It protests against various kinds of subjections by the power-structures such as imperialism, patriarchy, religion, social system etc., and narrates how the generations challenge them. "On the one hand, it is, like the Ayemenem House, a space that signifies oppression; it is explicitly imperial, a 'symbol of colonial authority'(51). It is also iconic of India's communal conflicts, where organized power in the form of the police force uses both neocolonial authority and patriarchal male physical strength. And yet the way in which various characters interact with the house and the use to which it is put suggests an interruption of its official status, and, at times, a direct confrontation with the values it represents" (Upstone, 2007). In the novel Chappu Thamburans (insignificant creatures) confront the existing 'gods' through their own small but significant ways. Two classes: Laltain and Mombatt

The subjugating social system in Kerala, at large in India, is a potpourri of caste and class, patriarchalism and imperialism, political parties and religions. The complex prejudiced and unfair system cannot be explained by the existing terminologies since 'isms' which had introduced the terms became corrupted. For example, the usages like 'haves' and 'have-nots' were promulgated by Marxism but the Marxist party in Kerala failed in uplifting the have-nots. Therefore, the author coins two new usages: Laltain and Mombatt. She uses laltain to those who rule like, Mammachi, Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Chacko, Inspector Thomas Mathew and so on and Mombatt for those who are ruled, like Velutha, Ammu, Rahel, Estha, Vellya Pappen and so on. The Laltain exploit the Mombatt in different ways and surprisingly it happens with the support of the formal structure.

The 'marathon struggle' of the Mombatt is expressed through the symbolic usages, like, Pappachi's Moth, The God of Loss, The God of Small Things, The God of Goose Bumps, etc.

The social structures such as marriage, parenthood, religions, siblings, political parties, police etc., which are formed for the well being of human beings have become the oppressive instruments. The novel without losing its rhythmic flow of the story, delineates all the main oppressive yokes of the society. Gaur (2010) says about the social evils presented in the novel.

"The life in this place is inextricably caught up into octopus-like clutches of social evils like male chauvinism, age-old discriminatory caste considerations of touchable and untouchable, police brutality, double standards of morality, chicanery of political idealism practised in the euphemistic name of Communism and taboos that wrongfully suppress natural urges of human origin in the name of sin ordained by religion. Sterling human qualities, viz. tenderness of heart and feeling, realisation of the dignity of work of all types, fraternal fellowship and collective harmonious living of social togetherness based upon mutual tolerance and exuberant large-heartedness are given a good-bye"(220-221).

Political scenario In the democratic India, 'the real power' is exercised by the political parties which are the unseen kings of the country. If parties are corrupted, the entire political system begins to produce miasma. This has been occurring in India and people are under their yoke. The hypocrisy of the political parties is realistically exposed in God of Small Things. The political ethos of Malayalies, who democratically elected the Communist party for the first time in the world, was shifted and they rejected the Communist party even in the election just after emergency in 1977. Roy launched a blistering attack against the communist party in Kerala and this resulted in the political agitation, at time of the publication of the novel. She even dared to call E.M.S. Namboodripad, the unquestionable leader of communist party, as "Running Dog, Soviet Stogie"

and narrates Chacko as “Marxist mind and feudal libido.’ K.N.M.Pallai, the local communist leader, overtly speaks for the poor and the oppressed. But covertly takes decisions in favour of the rich and the high caste.

“Comrade K. N. M. Pillai was essentially a political man. A professional omeletteer. He walked through the world like a chameleon. Never revealing himself, never appearing not to. Emerging through chaos unscathed.” (14).

The double face of Pillai lead to the death of Velutha who was also an active party man. instead of the ‘withering away of the state’ Roy narrates the withering away of the communist party which stood with the imperialism of different forms. She presents the twins, who suffered but tried to resist the oppressions of the society, against the son of Comrade Pillai who even changed his name, which is the very identity of a person. “In order to allay any fears his clients might have about his political leanings, he had altered his name slightly. Levin he called himself now. P. Levin” (128). To say the least, the party lost all its credibility. “The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy” (66). A similar opinion was also expressed by Indra Gandhi before she became an active politician.

“There is no point in calling the agitation communal.

It is communal only in so far as everything is communal in Kerala, including the Communists. The Communists very cleverly played the Nairs against the Catholics & now are trying to play the Ezhuvas against both” (Gandhi, 2005).

It says that a party which is destined to be revolutionary and fight against social evils made a compromise with them. Women The plight of the woman in the society constitutes a major part of the story and the complexity of these sufferings lead to the climax of the novel. Ammu, the protagonist of the novel leads a wretched life from birth to death and the novel narrates her as the embodiment of suffering: Ammu, who has ‘no more dreams’(42). ‘Male Chauvinist Pigs,’(83) refuse the rights and the holistic developments of women. Ammu was denied the higher education only because of belonging to the female gender and Chacko was sent to Oxford in spite of his poor performance only due to his male gender. Uma in *Fasting and Feasting* (1999) of Anita Desai is also denied higher education only on the basis of gender. The moral yard stick for men and women is different. Both Ammu and Chacko broke the bond of marriage but the approach of the family members and the society is entirely different. Chacko

got sympathy ‘out of men’s needs’ (168, 238, 295, 313) whereas Ammu was harassed even by the servant. Women themselves are caught in the trap of patriarchy without proper knowledge and act according to the unjust principles of male chauvinism. The suffering women are also not ready to change the society for their fellow beings but they cooperate with the male oppressing machinery. Mammachi who suffered a lot from Pappachi, never showed sympathy towards her daughter. “She [Mammachi] imagined it in vivid detail: a Paravan's coarse black hand on her daughter's breast. His mouth on hers. [...] His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. Like a dog with a bitch on heat. Her tolerance of 'Men's Needs' as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter” (257). The stepmother attitude of Mammachi is formed out of the male chauvinism and also becomes the protector of the same. "Patriarchy has compelled the Indian women to be totally subservient to the male in social as well as economic spheres" (Nityanandam, 2000). The major elements, which are narrated in the novel, used for the oppression of women are given in the figure:1 and they are interrelated in the oppression.

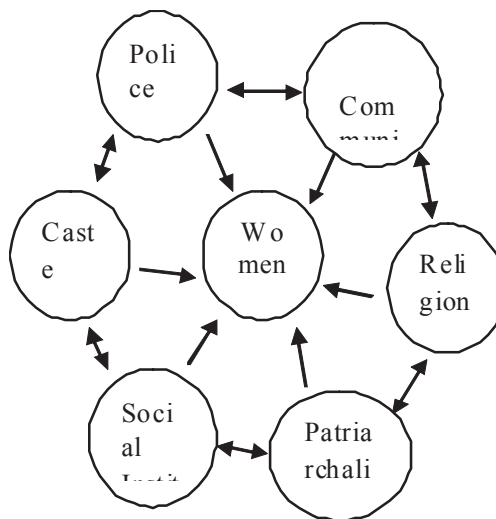


Fig. 1: The oppressing elements narrated in the novel. Marriage

Marriage, one of the most important social institutions, is turned into a legalized oppressive system and in patriarchal society women are the victims. The married women in the novel, such as Mammachi and Ammu are like caged animals. The male chauvinism of the husbands makes them fail, even to enjoy in the growth of their own wives.

“Mammachi takes lesson in violin. Her teacher is very impressed by her curiosity and devotion. But this news doesn't make Pappachi wild with glee, rather, he developed a sadistic attitude:

“The lesson were abruptly discontinued when Mammachi's teacher, [...]”(50).

Once trapped in marriage, women have no space for escape but live in the darkness like a prisoner. Husbands take the role of police and ill-treat them. “She referred to her husband [Mr.Pillai] as addeham which was the respectful form of 'he', whereas 'he' called her 'edi' which was, approximately, 'Hey, you!'” (269). Marriage is a tool for the annihilation of the woman and husbands physically torture their wives. “The Kathakali Men took off their make-up and went home to beat their wives”(236).

The most selfish sentence of Chacko, the representative of the patriarchal society, is that:

“What's yours is mine (Chacko) and what's mine is also mine” (57).

Transformation The novel says about the transformation of individuals in the post-sixties in India in the typical Keraite background. The oppressed especially the woman and the untouchable began to respond to the unjust structure and the changes can be seen in Indian society.

“Social change is a wider phenomenon and is brought about by a number of factors. It is true that all things change. It is also true that all things do not change drastically. But it is a lesson of history that when a society reflects upon its instruments with foresight, its consciousness for change gets sharpened” (Singh, 2011).

The change in the attitude of women representative of three generations are shown in table:1.

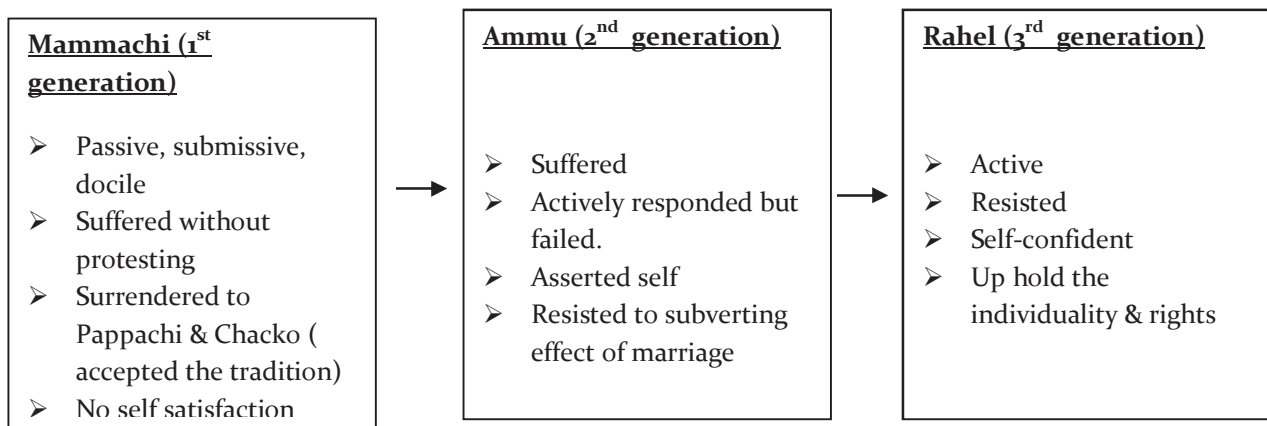


Table.1: The shift in the attitude of the three generations.

Caste system One may read with great astonishment Untouchable of the Mulk Raj Anand as he narrates the caste system of pre-independence era. However, even at the end of 20th century the caste system prevails in its outrageous form in democratic India and it is narrated in The God of Small Things. “The Ayemenem incident of killing Velutha is the microscopic vision of the orthodoxy's brutality against Dalits. In India plenty legal protections are provided to remove the atrocity against Dalits but they are only on the papers. It wouldn't change until the social attitude would change. If the Indian society would accept them, they wouldn't remain untouchable, socially and culturally. They would merge with the main stream. Then More Veluthas wouldn't die” (Gaijan, 2010). In Kerala the Paravans are considered as low caste and Velutha belongs to the same. He falls in love with Ammu, a Syrian Christian, and had sex casting aside all the traditions. Their new world which breaks the colour and creed is narrated passionately in the novel.

"Her brownness against his darkness, her softness against his hardness" (68).

At last, they had to pay the price of it by their lives.

“The ultimate outcome of the novel is the tragic

death of 'untouchable' by the 'touchable boots' at the police station. God is no more in control of 'small things' rather turning him to 'The God of Loss' ” (Mothe, 2010).

The caste system exists not only in Hindu community but also in every sector and religion in India and the novel narrates the untouchability in Christianity. But one positive thing about Christianity is that they were given education. Cross -cultural racism is also part of Kerala community.

“Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry”(45).

However, the shift of social ethos can be understood from the behaviours of Velutha and his father. Father accepts the caste system but Velutha showed courage to fall in love with high-caste woman and to have sex with her. Police How the police ought to be is defined in the novel: Politeness, Obedience, Loyalty, Intelligence, Courtesy, and Efficiency. However, the law instructors become nasty lawbreakers and the oppressed are not safe in the police station. The ruthless behaviours of the Inspector Thomas Mathew arouse anger in the readers.

“Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a

basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered.” (8).

The police force, who ought to protect the dignity of the woman, consider the female body as a commodity which is meant to be consumed like a sweet mango. The brutality of the police exposed at the time of torture of Velutha who was arrested on false accusations.

“He was naked, [...]. Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. [...]Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright, bare electric bulb reflected in it.” (319).

The police is an unquestionable barbaric tool in the hands of the oppressor.

“The novelist is ironic characterizing people who are trying to preserve the organization in order, including Inspector Thomas Mathew who efforts to instill order into a world gone wrong. According to Arundhati Roy, they are the mechanics who serviced the different parts of the same machine, that is, establishment” (Chinnam, 2010).

Neglected Childhood Roy draws our attention to one of the most serious issues, which the Indian society sidelines that is child exploitation. Children, being the most precious gift of human beings, should be nurtured with utmost care and The Constitution of India (Article 39) states that

“children are given opportunities and facilities to develop in a healthy manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity and that childhood and youth are protected against exploitation and against moral and material abandonment.”

Roy narrates the traumatic experience of Ammu, Rahel and Estha. Ammu, whose whole life was absolute hell, was born from a drunken father and an unsatisfied mother.

“On one such night, Ammu, aged nine, hiding with her mother in the hedge, watched Pappachi's natty silhouette in the lit windows as he flitted from room to room. Not content with having beaten his wife and daughter (Chacko was away at school), he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp” (181).

The childhood of Rahel and Estha was not an exception from their mother, Ammu. “When his bouts of violence began to include the children, [...] Ammu left her husband” (42). The uprootedness of Estha was pictured fantastically when he is compared with Karna, the character in Mahabharatha. “He is

Karna, whom the world has abandoned. Karna Alone. Condemned goods. A prince raised in poverty. Born to die unfairly, unarmed [...]” (231). The sexual abuse of Estha in Abhiash Talkies is another grave sin narrated in the story and his life in Calcutta: “A quiet bubble floating on a sea of noise.” (11). “Violence and the exploitation of women and children have been an unfortunate part of our history and these were often undertaken in the name of tradition and even the scriptures. These concerns remain to be addressed” (Singh, xlii). Commodification of Art Both the human beings as well as the noble arts are commodified in the globalized world. For Keralits, Kathakali is not a mere art form for entertainment but a form of worship. However, in the globalized world it is served in the hotels along with other dishes.

“Next to the bottles there was a list of all the Paradise products and a kathakali dancer with his face green and skirts swirling” (46).

India is losing its noble goal of *annma sasha karam* (self-realization) through art. “But there are some temples that a troupe will not pass by without performing in. The Ayemenem temple wasn't one of them, but these days, thanks to its geography, things had changed. In Ayemenem they danced to jettison their humiliation in the Heart of Darkness. Their truncated swimming pool performances. Their turning to tourism to stave off starvation. On their way back from the Heart of Darkness, they stopped at the temple to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encashing their identities. Misappropriating their lives” (229). Today, art is not a means for self-realization but for exploiting the tourists.

“Culture has to play a spiritually balancing role to actively minimize the negative elements of commodity-money relations in society. [...] There will be neither sustainable economic growth, nor social progress and durable peace, if we do not maintain growth in tune with our heritage” (Singh, 2011).

Conclusion: The novel is all about the ironic meaning of ‘small’ and it questions the ‘big things’ of oppressive society. ‘The god of great things’ is ruthless and hypocritical but ‘the god of small things’ possesses love and sympathy. The novel portrays the irony of ‘greatness’ in the educated and democratic society in a realistic manner. The novel calls for the universal ‘brotherhood and humanism’ which ought to be the real ‘God of All.’

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Lecturer and Administrator, Christ College, Pune
Carmel Vidya Bhavan, P.B. No. 3026, 26/4A
Matchwel Road, Vadgaon Sheri, Pune 411 014.
e-mail: samjyv@yahoo.com/ samjyv@gmail.com