
DESTABILIZED SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS IN AN EDUCATED, FRACTURED FAMILY: A PEEP INTO ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract: This paper examines the factors of social discrimination, cultural norms and mores and human betrayal which destabilize an 'educated' family in a little town of Ayamenam in the state of Kerala in India. On the surface it addresses a specific family in India, but when applied in a broader perspective, it is a universal phenomenon. There are three socio-cultural aspects discussed in this paper- videlicet- caste, gender and culture bias.

Caste stratification is peculiar to Indian community, but racial segregation at global level can be considered its parallel, to some extent. Gender and culture conflicts, shaking the foundation of world-order are age-old occurrences. Arundhati Roy takes this resonating social problem but, in modern context and shows that injustice arises when strict social divisions are enforced; the victims are lost, physically or psychologically slaughtered and unloved in a society that is apathetic and cold.

The universality of the issue is further suggested by the writer in announcing of the blurring of boundaries in the first chapter and by her choice of characters that are not just confined to the state of Kerala, but hail from Bengal, England, etc.

Introduction: India takes the privilege of being a Founding Member of the UNESCO, when still it (India) was under colonial rule, way back in 1946, supporting the mission of UNESCO in contributing to the inter-cultural dialogue through the diffusion of education, culture and information for justice, liberty and peace.

The UNESCO adopted its Constitution on 16th September 1945, with a Preamble, outlining its ideologies. The Preamble enshrines the human dignity:

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed... the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern."

Considering this milieu, and by taking the debut novel (and the only novel to date), of India's architecture graduate-turned aerobics instructor-turned writer Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, this paper attempts to show that the ingrained culture and the societal norms can exert their influence in both the extremes of the attitude-scale: positive and negative; war and peace. When codes are violated, the result is transgression. This may further mar the positive effect. The paper suggests certain measures to avert such catastrophe.

Core content of the paper: Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, assembled under the rubric of Booker Prize Winner, is a non-linear, multi-perspective account with flash backs and flash forwards, that fuses to form a kaleidoscopic impression of events. It is a disjunctive, lyrical (with the descriptions mostly being composed of short, rhythmic sentences) examination of an educated Ipe's family tragedy. Benan John Ipe (called Pappachi by his twin grand children), an Imperial Entomologist during the British Government and later Joint Director, Entomology in independent India, his violinist-wife Shoshamma Ipe (called Mammachi by the twins), his Oxford educated son Chacko and daughter Ammu, spinster sister Navomi Ipe (Baby Kochamma) are the residents of a small town of Kerala called Ayemenem.

The novel consists of various levels of narratives established over a long period of time, ranging from ancient history to the novel's present time; it alternates primarily between two dominant narratives: one is the novel's frame story and the other is the main embedded narrative. The frame story covers a period of twenty four hours marked by Rahel's return to her ancestral Ayemenam house in the year 1992, while the embedded narrative spans a two-week period beginning with another grand-child Sophie Mol's arrival from London to Ayamenem during the year 1969 and ends a few days after her tragic drown in the Meenachal river. The two

contrasting narratives are alternately and uniquely structured, and finally intricately woven to converge flawlessly. To an extent, the first narrative is chronological, the other is non-linear.

The head of the Ipe family, father of Sri Benan John Ipe, Reverend E. John Ipe was a priest of a Mar Thoma church, with a reputation of being personally blessed by the Patriarch of Antioch at the age of seven, and from thence was called as Punyan Kunju, which meant 'Little Blessed One'. This orthodox Syrian Christian family, belonging to the upper caste in Indian traditional caste structure, was so flourishing and thriving that, in the first decade of twentieth century itself, they have sent their daughter, Baby Kochamma to the University of Rochester in America from where she has completed a diploma in Ornamental Gardening. After her return, she *raised a fierce, bitter garden that people came all the way from Kottayam to see (P.26)*.

Her unrequited love with Father Mulligan, an Irish Jesuit priest, had let her remain a spinster. She is critical of the fight of her niece, Ammu, with the fate, *a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she has graciously accepted (P.45)*. Chacko and Ammu are the children of the Imperial Entomologist, Benan John Ipe, who was dedicated to his study on moths and insects, and equally dedicated to beating his wife, Shoshamma regularly and violently. His male chauvinism never tolerated her and their daughter Ammu; as he grew older, this went on a daily basis. Abuse is a repeated issue in the novel. This gave a good niche for the writer to show the extent to which abuse can affect a person, and the trauma and the mental consequences associated with it.

Ammu is scarred for life by the beatings of her father. The book tells of Ammu's beatings and her constant fear and hiding from her father Pappachi. When Ammu was eighteen, *All the day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father, and bitter, long-suffering mother (pp.38-39)*. When she went to spend summer with a distant aunt at Calcutta, she met Baba and got married to him, without her parents' consent. To her, anyone anywhere is better than her parents and Ayemenem. But very soon she has to go through the ordeal of abuse in the hands of her alcoholic, lying husband, who even went to the extent of forcing her to sleep with his boss, resulting in their divorce and Ammu's coming back to Ayemenem with her

dizygotic twins. When Estha was young, he was sexually abused by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man at Abhilash Talkies. Estha becomes almost paranoid that the Orangedrink Lemondrink man will find him, and starts shying away from people. Velutha, the untouchable, is physically abused to death by the police on the pretext that he had kidnapped Estha and Rahel, and tried to molest Ammu.

The characters are prone to both physical and emotional abuse in the name of gender, caste and age, resulting in a distress imposed on the submissive by ignoring, denying, aggressing, blaming, humiliating, belittling, bullying and rebuking. This attacks one's self-esteem. *The God of Small Things* explores the brutal violence and social injustice enforced on the marginalized, subjecting them to psychological trauma. The cold, calculating, sadistic cruelty of hypocritical Pappachi has developed in Ammu *a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big (181-182)*. The novelist takes her verbal weapon against the emotional and physical abuse and the story revolves around the emotional distraught of the victims that entails disaster in their lives, and a devastation in Ammu's family in particular. Pappachi, the man of the house, Chacko, the son of the house, Baby Kochamma, the aunt and grand aunt of Ammu and the twins, are people in the power structure who exploit the vulnerable state of the underprivileged Mammachi, Ammu and the twins, entailing ethical dilemma which insists them to transgress the natural laws designed long before. The first chapter talks about the blurring of boundaries programmatically announced: *Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom (P.1)* can also be noticed in the numerous intertextual allusions present in this dense novel.

The characters refuse to let themselves be imprisoned within the laws and rules established by a deeply conservative society and they transgress. In a closed society where traditional norms are held in priority, to walk to the other side of a separating limit is an act of disobedience and rebellion. This fact of disregarding established rules, imply a backward movement, a reverting to a degraded state of things (regression), that has happened in Ammu's life and the three grandchildren's lives.

Ammu- a *Syrian Christian, a Touchable, Mar Thomite, an upper-caste Christian-* had transgressed by marrying a Hindu and giving birth to *Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry (P.45)*. She returns to her parental home, unwelcomed, after her marriage fails with Baba. Her father, an Anglophile, did not believe when Ammu said that her husband had forced her to prostitute her to his employer (to keep his job), Mr. Hollick, an Englishman, because, to him, *an Englishman, any Englishman would covet another man's wife (P.42)*. To the inmates of the Ayemenem house, Ammu was a ruined and a lost woman *they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous (P.44)*. Ammu quarrels with her fate again. She takes on an Untouchable (Velutha) as a lover. He is, in many ways, the silent surrogate father to the twins; Ammu's *biology designed dance (P.335)*. Velutha imbricates her in so severe systemic discrimination that the novel very powerfully laments. Ammu ends up exiled, from her children, from herself, from her biological potential, and dies very alone.

Ammu's secret night affair with the Paravan, Velutha brings about his gruesome death in the hands of caste and class people. Even the little twins, to whom Velutha is both essential and taken for granted in their existence, like breathing betray their dear friend at the police station. It gradually becomes clear that only Velutha, an Untouchable who serves as the family carpenter, is competent enough to transform life rather than simply endure it -- but, of course, as he is an Untouchable; endurance is supposed to be all he is good for. Velutha fixes everything around Ayemenem House, from the factory's canning machine to the cherub fountain in Baby Kochamma's garden. He is "the God of Small Things". Yet his caste keeps him away from giving him the due value.

Chacko, the Rhodes at Oxford-educated Marxist has transgressed by marrying an English girl, Margaret Kochamma and told his parents back in India only when he needed money to run his family in London. When Margaret Kochamma was in love with him, *old limits were pushed back. Horizons expanded (P.245)*. The limits blurred; they are married for a short period. Then he had returned from his failed marriage in England and taken over Mammachi's chutney business - which, with cheerful incompetence, he is running into the ground. The same Mammachi who

could not accept Ammu's wedding with Baba or tolerate Ammu's waywardness, takes the defense of her son Chacko who flirts with his female employees. She never confronted her son about his female visitors. When Baby Kochamma complains, she defends him saying he cannot help having a *Mans needs (P.168)*, to which even the former accepted! Mammachi gets a separate entrance constructed to Chacko's room, so that her son would have privacy with his female visitors.

Sad to say, Mammachi's liberal and forgiving attitude towards her son does not apply to her daughter. Ammu's extramarital affair with Velutha is considered by her as Ammu desecrating their orthodoxy, and denigrating the family name forever. Her daughter's relationship with a Paravan is unbearable to her. This double standard *is perfectly acceptable to her because she subscribes to her culture's different expectations of men and women respectively. As a man, Chacko has more freedom than Ammu (Angelika Olsson, P.25)*. Though both of them have transgressed, and both have aided to the further break of the already fractured family, the so-called educated society is lenient towards man but intolerant towards woman. This is definitely not measured by the same standards in a society, ridden with social discrimination on the basis of caste and gender, and an extra strict adherence to the cultural norms.

Estha, Ammu and Sophie Mol have transgressed by crossing the overflowing river on the rainy night. This resulted in the tragic death of Sophie Mol, the 'white' nine-year old daughter of Chacko, and the haunting experience of this in the lives of all the family members. It also resulted in separating the twins who always thought of a single entity and not as two members, with Estha Returned to Baba and Rahel leading an unruly life. When other children of their age group were learning and enjoying, these twins *learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws. They heard its sickening thud. They smelled its smell and never forgot it (P.55)*.

The twins, after Estha re-Returned, and Ammu joined him leaving America for his sake, have transgressed with incest. When Estha was molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man, he approaches the room at Hotel Sea Queen, where they have lodged and the room was shared by Rahel and Uncle Chacko,

Rahel opens the door or Estha even before Estha knocks. This is due to the intense bond these twins share emotionally. This emotional connection provides them access to each other's individual memories. As no one else shares their sense of pain, they lie together in that hotel as each other's only source of comfort.

Twenty three years after that with Estha re-Returned, and not speaking to anyone, the twins have to help some means of helping Estha communicate his grief. When Ammu finds a raindrop glistening on the earlobe of Estha, Ammu relieves him off this raindrop. She *Touched it. Took it away* (P.93). The rain droplet was a tangible symbol of Estha's traumatic burden which Ammu tried to free him off from. But Estha did not respond. The severity of twenty three year old distress was too deep to be removed, and requires more intimate communication, perhaps.

A thing to note here is that the raindrop is like a heavy bead of mercury. It is scientifically proved that mercury is both poisonous and also useful for certain medical treatments. The contradiction in the image here is a presage of the twins' incest. They may find solace in it, but it is certainly against the Love Laws with tragic consequences. A distress account or traumatic narrative *enact the directing outward of an inward silent process to witness, both within and outside the texts* (Laurie Vickory P.3). During the rain Estha watches her brother undress (in the main narrative in 1992), but the writer indicates that this is not with lust. She was searching her brother's

nakedness for signs of herself. This is an attempt to identify in his adult body the body she remembers as her first source of comfort as his child.

The twins rediscover the comfort they used to find in being together as 'one', and commit incest. The description of the scene of incest is focused not on their sexual relationship but on the emotional bond and the effects it had on their stress and trauma. *What they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief* (P.328). Whatever may be the reason, incest is a transgression and not pardoned in a norm-ridden society.

Through these socio-cultural factors that have acted against the togetherness of a family and a society, Arundhati Roy sheds light on the cruelty of the oppressive caste system, which disadvantages the lower class regardless of how bright they are. Lower caste members are ostracized from society and are oftentimes targets for violence. Upper class individuals believe that interacting with lower class members will lower their status and dignity in society. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, coming from an upper class family, avoid mixing with lower class individuals like Velutha.

The same factors which have fractured the family can be turned to integrate the same, by shedding the unwanted Anglophilia, the bias and the unjust treatment to the underprivileged. Real education lies not in going abroad and learning through the books, but by broader perspective through understanding and negotiation.

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