

The Dehumanized Mind: The Trauma of the Marginalized in the God of Small Things

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Corresponding author Dr. Sujata Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Commerce and Humanities, Manav Rachna International University, Faridabad</p>	<p>The child, untouchable and woman- the three most underprivileged sections of the Indian society- get a profound portrayal in Arundhati's Roy <i>the God of Small Things</i>. The novelist has made a keen observation of their plight in the snobbish Indian order. These sections rarely get any representation in the pretentious Indian hierarchies. The predicament of these sections becomes even more pernicious in the modern disintegrated times we live in. The child, the untouchable and the woman are treated in quite shabby ways in our system. They are not provided with basic opportunities congenial to their normal growth. They are victims of the whims of privileged ones as well as the directives of institutions. This results in the loss of their genuine talent. The suppression by the society and institutions sometimes becomes so unbearable that they are driven towards the path of rebellion. However, the rebellion does not fruit in any betterment of conditions. Rather it leads to self destruction to the extent of even taking away their stamina to survive in society. This is the dehumanizing of the living human beings by denying them of their basic humanity.</p>
<p>Key words: Untouchable, underprivileged, snobbish, hierarchy, disintegrated, suppression, rebellion, stamina, dehumanizing</p>	

Arundhati Roy's first novel *The God of Small Things* has obtained much literary and critical acclaim. Both for its candid portrayal of various social issues and evocative style it still remains an exemplar. Arundhati Roy is a socially conscious writer who takes her writing to be a weapon for social activism as well as for social change. Her vision of man and society and the historical condition that she portrays, is very much akin to such French novelists as Balzac and Flaubert. Like them she writes

of an age marked by degeneration, disillusionment and vulgarity. "It is the time when the rosy idealism of Indian independence movement stood shattered at the face of coarse reality. It was the time of shattering of illusions. The grand objective of independence is not fulfilled creating a chaos and confusion in society. The writers and artists are observing with anguish this denigration of ideas and corruption of values." (Sujata 56-57)

Dr. Sujata , The Dehumanized Mind: The Trauma of the Marginalized in *the God of Small Things*

This is the phase of transition well reflected in *The God of Small Things*. Disintegration is the order of the day. Old norms and institutions are getting shattered without any appropriate alternative to replace them. It is the time of breaking up of the organic ties between an individual and his family and also between him and his society. The antagonism between sexes and among generations is on the rise. Individuals are getting more and more identity conscious. At the face of aggressive individualism, society too has tightened its sway. "The society is getting increasingly institutionalized where the interests of an institution appear in confrontation with those of an individual." (Sujata 56) It is in this context these novels have "turned introspective and an individual's quest for personal meaning in life has become a theme of urgent interest" (Mukherjee 204). However, in mature works like *The God of Small Things* this personal quest is done in the context of larger national and social issues.

The God of Small Things alienation and estrangement are the basic condition of man's existence on earth. Man is not just estranged from society and its institutions but he is estranged even from himself. There is crisis of identity as well as the problem of multiple identities. There is frantic search for one's roots as well as value and meaning in life. Fragmentation is the order of the day. The hapless individual has to face persons, institutions and relationship of a decayed and degenerated social-order. In the Indian context such predicament becomes even more glaring in the face of rigorous social hierarchies and restriction imposed by them. Despite Indian Constitution proclaiming all citizens as equals, differentiation and exploitations based on caste remain the

order of the day. The archetypal Indian patriarchy gives very little scope for asserting female individuality.

The God of Small Things tells about the inconsistencies of familial, social and political norms using strong childhood image in the background. The novel is about the antithesis between individual freedom and rules and restrictions imposed on it by various man made institutions. Children, here, are the major players of the action without being the major manipulators of situations. Innocent as they are, they are ignorant of the implication of their own actions as well as the actions and the situations around. They are the victims of personal and collective whims of the individuals and institutions. Thus they have to bear the burden of their childhood even when they grow up. They never become normal beings and fail to develop normal relationships. Esthappan, for example, who from being sullen and tense comes to a stage when he "stopped talking altogether" (10) and in a viable age of thirty-one becomes totally quiet man with "sea-secrets in the eyes" (92). The inner turmoil and meaninglessness of Rahel's life is reflected in the emptiness of her eyes that offends her American husband and eventually they are divorced.

In *The God of Small Things* is the tragic tale of Esthappan Yako and Rahel, "the two egg twins [...] physically separate but with joint identities" (2). Rahel and Estha are the children of broken homes. Unlike the midnight children of destiny, they are not born amidst the fanfare and exultation of much awaited independence of India. Rather they are born "amidst rumors of Chinese occupation and India's impending defeat [...] By candle light in a hospital with the windows blacked out" (40).

Still they are integral part of the overflowing current of their nation's history. They are very much the "Ambassadors of India" from whose behaviour the "first impression of your country" (139) is formed. Their mother is from a reputed Syrian Christian family of Kerala, while their father hails from the family of "once wealthy zamindars who migrated to Calcutta from East Bengal after partition" (70).

The very cosmopolitanism of Estha and Rahel prove to be their misfortune. They are the children of changing times. The virus of change has overtaken the nation. Still the people are not ready to accept these changes. As Comrade Pillai once stated, "Change is one thing acceptance quite another" (279). Ammu, their mother has defied her parents to marry a Bengali Hindu. What she desired is to get a cordial and humane relationship. But her story is one of broken dreams. To escape her husband's cruelty and recklessness she has to come back to her parents in their Ayemenem home with the hope of getting a safe and honourable shelter for her children. But this not has to be as they are taken to be living "on sufferance in the Ayemenem house, their maternal grandmother's house, where they really had no right to be" (45). They are always neglected and even despised. They are taken as "Half- Hindu Hybrids" as also are "doomed fatherless waifs" (45).

Rahel and Estha are too young to understand these venoms. However, their childhood innocence gets shattered in a single stroke. The true face of the world gets exposed before them and the equilibrium of their mind is broken. The coming of Sophie Mol, their exalted cousin (the daughter of their maternal uncle Chacko and his ex- wife the English lady Margaret) is the instigator. This is how they come to know the pomp and snobbery of the world. Now for the first

time, the children realize that there exists difference between people and people, between one child and another child. It is that one is superior and another is inferior. One is loved another is despised.

Even the unadulterated innocence of Rahel and Estha cannot always bear such neglect. The long cumulated discontent in them gets exploded, forcing them in unflinching rebellion. They refuse to be the participant in the "play" that is being performed to welcome "Our Sophie Mole" to home. Rather they are pleased to find solace in the company of Velutha, the untouchable carpenter. They are attracted by his instinctive disposition and are won over by his unadulterated love and care. The rebellion of children throws the mother to the path of rebellion too. She bypasses the hypocritical code of social decency and enters the "forbidden territory" to love and being lived by the untouchable Velutha. She defies the institution of family. She breaks the laws- the "Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much." (28)

What happened next is not beyond imagination, only that its speed and magnitude is alarming. The actions move in a breath taking speed and nobody seems to have any control over them. Ammu detention by her family members, her frenzied outburst against her own children, the twins' leaving of their home in a boat (accompanied by Sophie Mol), the capsizing of the boat in the middle of river Meenachal and drowning of Sophie in that- are all terrifying.

Now begins the face saving and save-honour exercises by the snobs of sophisticated society. The family, police, politicians- all join hands in maintaining status- quo. They are satisfied to find a

Dr. Sujata , The Dehumanized Mind: The Trauma of the Marginalized in *the God of Small Things*

scapegoat in Velutha, the “Usubmissive Parvan” whose actions and dispositions have all along seemed to challenge their authority and privilege. He is charged with attempt of raping Ammu, kidnapping the three children and murdering Sophie Mol. The twins are tricked to testify against him. In one of the most moving scenes of the novel, Estha is face to face with bruised and tortured Velutha in the police custody:

The swollen eyes opened. Wandered, then focused through a film of blood on a beloved child. Estha imagined that something in him smiled. Not his mouth, but some other unhurt part of him (320).

And what has Estha done on his part? He just said “Yes”, implying it was Velutha who had kidnapped them and killed Sophie Mol. And this “Yes” takes a heavy toll on not only Estha but Rahel as well leaving them pricked with their conscience and tormented by their self for whole of their lives “ In the years to come they would reply this scene in their heads, as Children. As teenagers, as adults.....” (32).

The God of Small Things is the story of revolt and its consequences- what man aspires and what he gets. The innocence of Rahel and Estha are left shattered at the face of corruption and hypocrisy of the world. They are separated from each other at the tender age of seven as people say, “together they were trouble, *natas ni rieght seye*” (302) or to put in the right order “Satan in their eyes”. They are made responsible for the death of Sophie Mol. They suffer from the sense of guilt for the torture and brutal killing of their beloved friend Velutha at the hands of police and subsequent suffering and death of their own mother.

Tormented by their own self and repudiated by the world, the twins once again find their

way to Ayamenem. There they linger aimlessly without any plan of future, shorn of all vitality and desires. “No plans..... No Locus stand I” (188). What happens next is the normal course of abnormal circumstances. While trying to share the ‘quietness’ and ‘emptiness’ they come to such a road where all the rules and laws become non- existent. In trying to give solace to each other they break the codes of so called social decorum. “Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief” (328).

Taken from an earthly point of view, this is immoral. But in the actual sense of the term, this is neither moral nor immoral. Rather it is tragic. The fate of Rahel and Estha is as tragic as that of Oedipus in the classical Greek tragedy. Like Oedipus they are victims of society, those betrayed by circumstances. Their tragedy is not just the outcome of their own action, but the culmination of various forces at work. “That something happened, when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine on the vast, violent, circling, driving ridiculous, insane, unfeasible public turmoil of a nation” (19).

Velutha’s undeserved sufferings and death mostly result from the fact that he is an untouchable. His humiliation in society is seen when he presents his gifts to Ammu and she manages to take them without getting touched by him. Family the greatest base of Indian social life is breaking up as much by its inherent weakness as by the burden of aggressive self-assertion plus the wind of permissiveness blowing everywhere. People, especially the exploited ones are fast becoming commodities and are used as merchandise for profit. Persons with full and rounded personality are making room for split and undeveloped personalities

Dr. Sujata , The Dehumanized Mind: The Trauma of the Marginalized in *the God of Small Things*

full of aberrations and complexes. A telling incident is of Estha's being seduced by a maniac in the Abhilas Talkies.

He got a cold bottle and straw. So he held a bottle in one hand and a penis in the other. Hard, hot, veiny [...] The orangedrink lemondrink Man's hand closed over Estha's [...] He moved Estha's hand up and down. First Slowly. Then fastly (103).

And the trauma of a sensitive boy of seven can easily be imagined:

Estha alone walked weavily to the bathrooms. He vomited a clear, bitter lemony, sparkling fizzy liquid. The acrid after-taste of a littleman's first encounter with fear (119).

Persons like Estha made to pass through travails and trauma lose all strength and will-power. They drift aimlessly falling victim to the sinister forces let loose all rungs of society. Lapses of Estha and Rahel can't be called to be product of their will as society has not allowed them to form a will or personality. If they are amoral their society is more so. So Rahel and Estha are tragic figures like Oedipus, the hero of Sophocles' great tragedy *Oedipus the King*. Like him they are the victims of society, those betrayed by circumstances. Their tragedy is not just the outcome of their own action, but the culmination of various forces at work. As the writer remarks:

That something happened, when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent circling, driving ridiculous, in the sane, unfeasible public turmoil of a nation.
(19)

The real aim of the novelist in the *God of Small things* is to show the fate of these pure beings in the vile world. The novel laments the loss of power and ultimate potentialities. Thus the novel is about the loss of genuine talent in the face of prevailing corruption and butchery. But talent is not alone to be lost. With it is also lost innocence and very stamina to live. Thus bruised and shattered innocence of Rahel and Estha, in the *God of Small things* becomes the symbol of fate of innocence and purity in the turbulent situations we live in.

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