

**MEDIATING CULTURAL ARTEFACTS/ PRACTICES THROUGH
CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES: AN ANALYSIS OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF
CULTURAL STUDIES**

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Abstract

The Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy's engrossing tale of multifarious issues, *The God of Small Things* (1997) unravels the cultural scenario of mid-twentieth century Kerala society. The patriarchal, gender and caste-biased, politically sensitized and manipulated society is constructed employing cinematic techniques such as flash backs and flash forwards, 'cut', montage, 'Phantasy', etc. Dichotomy of power structures existing everywhere finds expression in this sad tale of untold miseries. This article focuses on the cultural artefacts/ practices such as food habits, music, cinema, education, family prestige, and colonial hangover which split the society into two – the powerful and its binary, the powerless. Her brilliant and unique method of presentation of these issues utilizing the techniques of film making is closely examined in this paper. In myriad ways, Roy brings out alive Kerala's composite culture and power struggles even within families which are microcosms of society.

Key Words: Culture, Power, Montage, Phantasy, Cinematic Images.

Arundhati Roy, "the Novelist extraordinary" (R.K.Dhawan 11) has invited a lot of critical acclaim since winning the Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. No other Indian writer's works, except may be Salman Rushdi's have been analyzed, discussed and studied as much as this writer's absorbing story of the cultural history of Kerala and the tragic pathos of the personal histories of Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel. The kind of critical attention she has attracted is enviable. Her narrative has been studied from varied angles- its linguistic exuberance (Cynthia vanden Driesen, Alessandro Monti, C.Sathymala); narrative inventiveness (K.Ratna Shiela Mani, Prayag D. Tripahi, Pier Paolo Picciucco, C.J.Davees, P.Hari Padma Rani, Nishi Chawla); gender issues (Madhumalati Adhikari, Mohit Kumar Ray, N.P.Singh, Nirmala C. Prakash, Jacob George C); political implications and social issues(Aijaz Ahmad, Urbashi Barat, Laxmi Parasuram, Amina Amin, Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri, Dieter Riemenschneider, Sumanya Satpathy, S.P.Swain) – to mention a few articles.

In an interview originally given to the *Frontline* in 2001 and later published in *Arundhati Roy: Critical Perspectives* Arundhati Roy remarked “I don’t think my book would make a good film”(194). This was declared in spite of the obviously cinematic quality of the novel and the techniques employed. Roy who had written two feature screenplays and acted in cinema was very much aware of the apparent cinematic quality of her poignant at the same time powerful saga of three generations of lost people at Ayemenem Tharavad in Kerala. She comments that “perhaps because I was a screen writer, I set out to write a stubbornly visual but unfilmable book” (195). The sheer visual impact of this well-crafted novel is thus acknowledged by Roy. The quick flicks of scenes, from one ‘cut’ to the next, allusions to the classic *The Sound of Music*, Malayalam movie *Chemeen* (itself an adaptation of Malayalam writer Thakazhi Sivasangara Pillai’s novel of the same title) with the characters Ammu, Estha and Rahel singing songs and dancing to the tune, and the depiction of Kathakali performances, picturesque images, etc. raise this novel to the level of “ performing art” (C.J.Davees 330).

In this paper I would like to discuss the cinematic mode of narration chosen by Roy, and attempt to approach the novel in the perspective of cultural studies, as the method of narration really brings out the traumatic nature of the story of Estha and Rahel and the cultural ethos of the society responsible for their tragedy. After analyzing her novel’s fragmented structure with its polyphonic voices, sudden flash backs and flash forwards, the fast paced momentum with which she moves from one scene to the other like the rotating reels of a movie, I propose an in-depth study of the opening chapter and the closely juxtaposed love scenes in the end. The cultural milieu, in which the novel is set, is revealed through subtle strokes of different hues by Roy. In the interview given to *The Week* she comments, “I would start somewhere and I’d colour in a bit and then I would deeply stretch back and then stretch forward” thus stressing the carefully crafted nature of her work. For her “the structure of the story, the way it reveals itself was so important... I really took a lot of trouble in designing the structure of the story” (46). The apparently loose structure of the novel is formed employing cinematic images, montage, and skillfully constructed visual impact creating ‘phantasy’ (Kluge) which involves the active and imaginative participation of the readers making them co-producers of the story. Montage is defined as “the art of producing a sequence of abruptly alternating scenes or images” (934) by Webster’s New World College Dictionary. Film Theorists and cultural critics Serge Eisenstein, Alexander Kluge and many others stress on how by employing this technique the spectator’s reactions can be fused with the creative process, producing a richer emotional expression of a film’s theme. Thus they stress on the social responsibility of the director. By Roy’s overt style of handling this film technique, she compels the reader/ spectator “to proceed along that self same creative road that the author travelled in creating the image” (Eisenstein 34). When the reader/ spectator becomes one with the creative process, the film/ book’s theme is impressed upon his/her mind. When the writer succeeds in creating image after image emotionally embodying his theme, and the reader goes along the same road, then the book accomplishes its social function. In order to take part in the creative process the reader has to indulge in imagination and fantasy, a fusion of what Kluge calls ‘phantasy’. As he says “a continuous shifting of perspectives is typical of phantasy”(215).

The story proper can be told in a few words. It centres on a family of wealthy Syrian Christian landowners comprising the grandmother, Mammachi; her divorced son, Chacko, her divorced daughter, Ammu; Ammu’s twins, Estha and Rahel; and an unmarried aunt, Baby Kochamma. Margaret, Chacko’s British ex-wife and their daughter Sophie come to India to visit Chacko. The day of their arrival coincides with the beginning of an illicit relationship between

Ammu and Velutha, a paravan (a low-caste Hindu) and as a consequence of this being brought to light the children run away in a boat resulting in the accidental drowning of Sophie Mol. In an attempt to salvage the family honour, Baby Kochamma accuses Velutha of rape and kidnapping, convincing the innocent twins to testify against him. Velutha dies victim of police brutality and Ammu is thrown out by the family to die at the age of thirty –one, as the writer announces with an unusual comment, “Not old. Not young. But a viable die-able age” (3). While Estha is packed off to Calcutta to live with his father, Rahel remains in the family home, unloved and not cared for. The entire action takes place over a period of two weeks. Twenty seven years later, Estha, now an eccentric man of strange habits, never coming out of the walls of silence he has built around him, is sent back to Ayemenem by his father, who is migrating to Australia. Rahel, who has been living in America since her marriage, returns to look after her twin. On to this bare skeleton of a story, Roy incorporates the elements of culture, politics, history, fantasy and imagination, and gives different dimensions to the simple story. Almost all the important characters developed later in the novel find mention in the first chapter, along with their most crucial actions which affected the course of the plot. The scenes presented in their order- Sophie Mol’s funeral, the twins’ birth, Baby Kochamma and her past, Velutha’s death, Estha’s silence, Rahel’s marriage and divorce, the twins’ early education, Ammu’s death, Comrade Pillai’s role in the tragic death of Velutha, Margaret Kochamma’s grief, Ayemenem house, its past glory and present uncared- for condition – all are introduced in the first chapter itself -glimpses of these quickly moving brief scenes have got a tantalizing effect on the readers igniting their curiosity. She creates the effect of Montage here. From one abrupt ‘cut’ to the next the reader moves on not with police –like attention but the relaxed attitude requisite for the indulgence of ‘phantasy’, as theorized by Alexander Kluge.

“The result is that the first chapter of 38 pages encompasses the entire story of the book” (K. Ratna Shiela Mani). The rest of the book comprising some 250 pages goes back again and again to the issues mentioned in the first chapter. The swift shifting of these images is very much like the cinematic technique of montage engaged by Alexander Kluge, Eisenstein and a horde of other film makers. The casualness of tone adopted by Roy to bring out the pathos of twins’ condition and the sudden leaps from one scene to an entirely unconnected scene have the effect of shocking people out of their complacency which is clearly the intention of the writer. To the images in the first chapter more and more visual at the same time word pictures are imposed to unravel the mystery behind the tragic condition of twins. These images tell you how and why they have ended up like quiet, empty shells, in spite of the initial promise of brilliance. All their growing years, they bore the wounds inflicted upon them by the cultural tenets of Kerala society.

The cultural practices or artefacts such as food habits, music, cinema, education, family prestige, and colonial hangover, strewn throughout the story bring out the power relations between and within social groups. A close scrutiny of the characters reveals conflicts between two groups, one powerful and the other, its binary opposite, powerless. If Chacko, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi and Pappachi appear as all- powerful custodians of culture, Ammu, Estha and Rahel who should have shown allegiance to the same social group flout its laws, to be exact, the love laws which insist on “ who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33) and suffer the terrible consequences of the transgression. Velutha, his father, Vellya Paapen, and Kuttappen form the under privileged powerless group. The first group members are educated: Chacko, with a Rhodes scholarship has been to Oxford University; Baby Kochamma with a diploma in Ornamental gardening from University of Rochester in America; Pappachi, the Imperial Entomologist and the violin playing Mammachi signify with their many feathers the

cultural hegemony over the second group. Ammu, Estha and Rahel with their English education and Anglophile- style of upbringing (familiar with English songs and stories, exposure to English movies like *The Sound of Music* and made to write impositions when caught speaking in Malayalam by Baby Kochamma) should have been a part of the first group. Their desire to love and be loved push them across barriers set by the society. Three of them have close associations with Velutha. Ammu, who dares to accept him as her lover, throwing to winds the social hierarchy, is in turn thrown out of her home by the stern moralists in her family. Her family faces total disintegration- Estha is enveloped in his cocoon of silence and Rahel, always an odd child returns to Ayemenem divorced and alone, and so misfits in the Kerala society, and is contrasted with the successful young son of comrade Pillai who holds a good job and is married and well-settled. All the members of the first group and the transgressors seem to display the colonial hangover- the cultural domination of the British Raj. Pappachi , the Imperial Entomologist, who wears a three piece suit even during the scorching days of summer and take rides in his car through the dirt roads of Ayemenem, refuses to believe that Mr. Hollick, an English man and Ammu’s husband’s employer has made advances towards her. Chacko, a Rhodes Scholar, who could quote long passages from western classics and whose prestige is increased as a result of his marriage with a white skinned English woman, Margaret, cannot stand his sister Ammu’s affair with a paravan and throws her out of the house turning a blind eye towards his own affairs with factory women. Baby Kochamma, proud of her correct accent and her education in America displays a rigid sense of morality, a byproduct of the conservative catholic cultural codes, devoid of true Christian spirit. Mammachi too, with her talent for playing on violin, for making jams and jellies and in general following her family’s aristocratic ways, claims superiority.

Ammu, Estha and Rahel with their education and the kind of upbringing and the family to which they belong should have been part of the privileged group, but are ill-treated and thrown out to join the third group of down- trodden, powerless ones as they ignore the dividing boundaries between the first group and the third group. Kerala’s patriarchal middle class society and the values they uphold are clearly brought out by the novel. Transgression of love laws is accepted in the case of Chacko, excusing it as his “man’s needs”, whereas Ammu is pushed out to the streets and humiliated (the inspector calling her “veshya” (8)), her lover Velutha is callously treated and later dies under police custody , and the children Rahel and Estha suffer ignominious fates. Even though Mammachi runs the pickle factory, Chacko being the man of the house, pockets the profit. Ammu has no share at all in the family property. This gender divide is stressed upon throughout the book.

It is not only in the case of education, family prestige, class level and colonial hangover that a clear segregation is discernible in the case of the first group and the third group. Even in food habits, taste in music, etc. this difference is to be noted. Cakes, jams, jellies, toublerone chocolates, pineapple slices are part of the world of the first group whereas *kanji* (rice gruel) and *meen*(fish) is the lot of the third group. That power is exercised through people who consume pineapple slices and stew, whisky and brandy, is made clear through the picture Kuttappen draws about Meenachal river. She pretends to be a harmless church-going old lady having “idly appams for breakfast, kanji and meen for lunch” (210), but, according to Kuttappen, the evil river actually eats something English, “Pineapple slices and Stoo. And she drinks. Whisky. And brandy” (211). The first group members hold themselves superior by following exotic food habits. Chacko , at Hotel Sea Queen having “Roast chicken, finger chips, sweet corn and chicken soup , two parathas and vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce. Sauce in a sauce boat.” (114), shows another instance of superior taste. The children transgress all boundaries when they visit

Velutha's hut ignorant of these power struggles. They are both at home singing songs with Kuttappen and songs from the classic film *The Sound of Music*. Power is exercised through this superiority of taste, education, family's economical and social supremacy by the powerful first group over the subjugated powerless ones in the third group.

The last scene in a movie, usually grips the audience with its intensity. It is climactically very important. In *The God of Small Things* the end is actually the beginning of the terror, the terror that engulfed the lives of Velutha, the God of Small Things, Ammu, Estha and Rahel. The first meeting of Ammu and Velutha that ends with the word 'Naaley' meaning tomorrow, is sensitively presented by Roy. By placing this union at this strategic point, and by the lyrical description of the sexual act, even though it has invited some criticism, Roy reiterates her intention of keeping Velutha, a subaltern, the hero of her brilliant tale.

Arundhati Roy mediates the social, political and cultural scenario of Kerala through subtle paint strokes, through fast moving cinematic images, shaking the readers out of their complacency, forcing them to create new meanings out of the all-encompassing, panoramic view of Kerala society of the mid -twentieth century. A spicy and heady mixing of multiple wares, a typical feature of Indian movies (very much like the pickles jams and jellies of Mammachi) is what the readers find in this fascinating tale. Music, dance, overt and direct references to movies and books, both western and eastern, lyrical and picturesque description of Kerala monsoon, Meenachal River, etc are woven into the colourful fabric of this story. Roy seems to display a cinematic understanding of the world, as if she observes everything through the lens of a fast moving camera. The rich tapestry she spreads out before the readers is not only visually impressive but also succeeds in imprinting the cultural environment of Kerala.

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