

**THE ‘GRAND VALUES’ AND *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*:
A POST-MODERNIST VIEW**

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In her solitary novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy presents a kaleidoscopic view of Indian socio-political system with its changing social, moral and ethical values that were once considered as great, grand and grounded to the root. But the crumbling of these values into small things with the development of society in its uncertainties has given Arundhati a chance to look at the reality from a different angle. The ‘grand narratives’ have lost their significance in this changed situation. Lyotard states that "Post-Modernism favors seeing the world in more rhetorical terms as a field of contending smaller narratives, where people strive to make their point of view and their interests paramount by making their narratives more convincing (1979)." The novel, though written in the traditional narrative style, suddenly moves out of it and jumps through time. The memories which Rahel recollects are wending and this technique makes the novel adopt the post modernist technique where time is in its fluid allowing parts to be collected to understand the whole as in Rushdie.

Arundhati herself says while declaring how the novel developed in her hands, “It was all just coming out of me like smoke I suppose and I kept putting it down (1997, October).” The ‘grand narrative’ finds a new post-modern dimension to present the reality in fragments coming like smoke. Moreover, Arundhati Roy has got a new language and a new technique to present the reality of the Indian social system. The novel to many readers appears to have no one end as said by Roy quoting her friend in *The End of Imagination*, ‘ In some ways it's a perfect story. Perfectly baroque in its excess. The trouble is that it has, and only can have only one perfect ending; ’ and the reply of Arundhati Roy is that ‘there was no such thing as a perfect story’ (Roy: 1998, p 3). But the common reader fails to understand that the novel in its post-modernistic style has multiple ending as the reality does not have the finality and so is the ending. The social theme of discrimination in the name of caste, gender and sex, patriarchal oppression against women, feudal oppression against dalits, untouchables and like is well treated in a very subtle manner giving a new structure. Arundhati Roy herself says: “I think that one of the most important things about the structure is that in some way the structure of the book ambushes the story.... it tells a different story from the story the book is telling. In the first chapter I more or

less tell you the story, but the novel ends in the middle of the story, and it ends with Velutha and Ammu making love and ends on the words ‘tomorrow’. And though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible, the fact that the book ends there is to say that even though it is terrible it’s wonderful that it happened at all ” (1999).

In *The God of Small Things* the characters like Estha , Rahel, Ammu and Velutha suffer in the hands of Baby Kochamma and Mammachi. The death of Velutha, the untouchable, in the police custody due to his affairs with Ammu shows how social tradition and police power forces injustice on the small things of the society. Velutha was falsely implicated in the charge of the murder of Sophia Mol. Ammu is called ‘vesya’ by Inspector Thomas Mathew when she goes to the police station. Ammu is also locked and beaten up by Baby Kochamma when Velutha’s father reports her affairs with Velutha. The sufferings of the two are the result of social conventions, gender bias, hypocrisy, male chauvinism and social moorings. The loneliness and suffocating atmosphere of the Big Ayemenem engulf the childhood of both Estha and Rahel. They are like poisoned birds being tormented in the rigid social framework. Their simplicity and innocence fall easy prey to the big things which try to control the small. The pangs of the conservative social life, the negative or poisoning psychological impact on the minds of the innocent make them suffer and rebel from within. The small things do not remain small but cause ripples in the water of the pond, the Great Indian Pond. ‘Big Man, the Laltain sahib, Small man, the Mombatti’ is quoted in the novel while referring to the dreams of an ordinary worker or an old Bihari coolie (Roy: 1997, p 89) .’ For Arundhati the big are the people who are protected like lanterns, and the small are the candles which easily get put out with a bit of wind. The depressed, the outcast, the marginalized, the dalits, the women, the poor, the uneducated fall victims to the selfish interests of the privileged, the powerful, the moneyed and the men who are big enough to control the society and its social, political and religious institutions.

The marginals such as dalits, women, untouchables, have-nots, the downtrodden and deprived, educationally, socially and economically backward are small things represented well in her internationally acclaimed novel *The God of Small Things* . In *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* she says, “ The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they’re engaged in” (Roy : 2005, p 13). In fact, in all her non-fictional writings Roy champions the cause of the subaltern in a much more wider term. Democracy and justice and her strong opposition to all forms of inequality, discrimination, injustice and oppression have found a very significant place in her writings. Her voice is the voice of the marginals rising against all odds. Equally gripping and powerful is the way the novel depicts and rationalises the socio-cultural realities of the Indian system. Arundhati Roy, in her novel, portrays the society of Ayemenem, a place in Kerala, which is deeply rooted in the patriarchal value system, and epitomizes all places where patriarchal structures reign supreme. Roy focuses upon some of the key issues like marginalization and oppression of women having no *locus standi*, lack of legal and inheritance rights for women and women being subjected to violence in marriage. *The God of Small Things* is a well-known novel dealing with the universal theme of social consciousness in terms of exposure of the tyranny and injustice meted out to the untouchable. The novel categorizes its characters on the basis of whether one belongs to the god of small things or big things. Characters like Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Eastha belong to the former category for they are always at receiving end while Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Chacko, Thomas Mathew, and Comrade Pillai belong to the latter category. Velutha, the titanic figure, stands out as the representatives of the untouchables in the novel. His consciousness is shaped by the oppositional pulls of big dreams and small realities. He

is God of small things. In the words of Arundhati Roy: “The God of Loss? The God of Small things? The god of Goose Bumps and Sudden Smiles? Of Sourmetal Smells - like steel bus-rails and the smell of the bus conductor’s hands from holding them? (Roy : 1997, p 217).”

The woman characters sketched by her as Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel articulate the variants of resistant rebellion through the examination of the marital and inter-gender relations. Somewhere, she casts the resistance against gender oppression and predicament of Indian women in the light of global inequalities. The marginalization of the main character Ammu of *The God of Small Things*, reflects the rebellion nature of her, against the set conventionality. The laws of love, quest for self identity, biased social structure, law of inheritance and the cornering of all these tantrums by challenging the power structure of social order personifies Roy as a feminist. While weaving the role of her protagonist of her fiction *The God of Small Things*, Roy explores the crisis of identity. Throughout the novel, the struggle of her protagonist at various strata, as discussed above, segregates the real picture from the fabricated one. The patriarchal plot, financial and sexual exploitation, figuration of woman as material of pleasure and social injustice prefigure Roy’s inner voice struggling for freedom and equality, challenging traditional ideas and conventions. Through the characters portrayed as Ammu or Baby Kochamma or Rahel, the novelist as a woman rebels against such social structures and even challenging the institution of marriage. She expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions, position of woman and the steps taken to stop every possible change. In short, it can be said that in a very bold and aggressive way, Roy tried to characterize the issue of identity through her characters by way of showing them resisting oppressive and repressive social and political structures. In a way, the writer tries to show the fall of the great patriarchal order controlling the place of women and their identity as the oppressed lot along with other marginals or ‘mombattis’. The suffering of the marginalized and the dalits due to ‘grand values’ is powerfully presented by Roy. As such, *The God of Small Things* dissects the socio-economic and cultural hegemony of patriarchal society and shows that the norms of patriarchal society have self-destructive elements filling anger in women who will dismantle the patriarchy sooner or later. Ammu is an example of a woman who revolts in search of an identity. In the novel Ammu touches untouchable Velutha lovingly and defies social norms. According to A. Subhashini, “...In *The God of Small Things* there is a great deal of revelation of female experience. The setting is a well-established patriarchal society, where women are naturally oppressed and exploited. There are unfulfilled desires, broken marriages, shattered faiths and prejudices, planned revenge in the novel. These complex problems bring nothing but frustration to the female characters of the novel (2011).”

In *The God of Small Things* these small things or characters with their small and petty acts, considered unethical, unsocial, immoral and unacceptable, tend to reject the absolute truth, the grand narratives or the grand values. This post-modernist scenario of the present time allows Arundhati to go beyond the wider unity of the narrative to see things in fragments . The novel has to tell stories of the people who are in and around struggling to say about their own lives, small and ugly, silent and vocal. The multiple ending of the novel with multiple meaning endorses relativism to see the reality of the society Roy presents. To use Linda Hutcheon’s phrase, a post-modernist novel tries to ‘ use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention’. Such novels challenge ‘the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness’ (1988) . Roy’s novel in totality is in the tradition of post-modernist fiction questioning the liberal humanism, ‘grand narrative’ and the unity of all in terms of morality, social system, traditional norms and ,above all the whole oppressive system. As the social

conventions break in the world of Arundhati's novel, the form of the novel also takes unconventional turns to depict the reality. The grand values, the grand narratives, wither away in face emerging social realities of the time which bring forward multitudeness of the things in their different forms. The world of God is challenged, the absolute is denied, the authority is defied and things are put to debate. Perhaps this is what Arundhati wants to explore through the novel written in the post-modernist era where the things are not seen in whole but in parts, not by accepting the conventions, but by being unconventional.

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