

## **Heart of Darkness in Arundhati Roy's the *God of Small Things***

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### **Abstract**

Darkness prevails across the society in the world, be it physical darkness or mental darkness. People are enslaved of different ills, corrupted the heart and soul of human being. There are subjugation, ignorance and marginalization, atrocities against minorities, children, youth, women and untouchable. Roy's the *God of Small Things* takes note against caste-system, gender bias, superstitions and other wrongs of the society. It depicts extreme sufferings of Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha; patriarchal domination of Pappachi and Chacko; domestic violence against Mammachi and Ammu; childhood exploitation, pain and sorrow of Rahel and Estha. It also highlights severe life condition of lower caste, untouchable. Paravans, a lower caste, untouchable were not allowed to touch anything that touchable touched. They were forced to sweep away their footprints so that touchable cannot defile themselves. Velutha was tortured mercilessly by the upper-caste Police Inspector Thomas Mathew because he loved a Syrian Christian lady Ammu. Marxism, which usher for a new world, is also losing its position in the society. It became a tool of exploitation for Mr. Pillai, a Marxist. He not only exploited labor of Ayemenem but also lower untouchables.

**Key Words: Darkness, subjugation, marginalization, untouchable, exploitation.**

Arundhati Roy, a novelist and activist who devoted most of her life for the upliftment of the downtrodden specially women, lower caste, untouchables and raised slogan against the exploitations faced by women and labor class in the bourgeoisie dominated society, won Man Booker Prize for her first novel the *God of Small Things* in 1997. Though the novel unfolds some of the major experiences and happenings of her life, it is an outstanding presentation of compassion, tragedy, outrage, love, hatred, depression, revolution, marginalization and

exploitation. In her non-fiction writings, she supports and questions different issues like Kashmiri separatist movement, Narmada dam project, American invasions in Afghanistan, 'super power image' of America, India's testing of nuclear weapons and India's softness against terrorism.

The term 'the heart of darkness' is taken from Joseph Conrad's novel, 'The Heart Of Darkness'. Roy says that, "in Ayemenem, in the heart of darkness, I talk not about the White man, but about the Darkness, about what the Darkness is about." (Frontline, August 8, 1997). The darkness refers to the subjugation, ignorance and marginalization of the people in Kerala. Darkness also includes, according to Ranga Rao, 'atrocities against minorities, Small Things: children, youth, women and untouchable'. Darkness ignites the caste system, social attitude, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions superiority and inferiority, gender biasness etc.

Kerala is known as 'God's own country' but the *God of Small Things* portrays it as ungodly. The characters are victimized and their life is overshadowed with despair and gloom. The novel highlights the motif of isolation of 'the other' and their ultimate transgression by the exploiters. Throughout the story, the natural world- the plants in the garden, the monsoon rains, and the river push against the expanses of their confinement and creep into "civilized spaces". Similarly, love, restricted by both verbal and unarticulated rules, pushes at the peripheries of what is acceptable to emerge through the repression-of "civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (292)- as an incestual relationship between the twins. Roy adumbrates the undertones of the "small lives" being governed by the Big God-the British colonizer. The destiny of human being was manipulated by the Big God. "That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity." (20) The Paravans and Pulayas joined the Anglican Church to escape the "scourge of untouchability" (74).

They received a little money and food as an incentive. But later they discovered that they were still discriminated against. After independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits as they were Christians and therefore casteless. They were torn between two worlds- one rejected by them and the other not ready to accept them.

*The God of Small Things* is about the rigid caste-structure of Kerala, and of India also. Arundhati Roy has criticized both casteism of Indian Society and male superiority in different walks of Indian life. This caste-oriented rigidity sometimes plays havoc with the innumerable innocent lives. The 'bigness' of 'big things' and 'big people' should be read in their generous and compassionate understanding of 'small things' and 'small people'. In the words of Rama Kundu, "Roy tries to sensitize this society to the cruelty of some of its traditions by artistically challenging certain common age-old complacently held but dehumanizing social taboos. She also shows how the women and the untouchable are both treated as impersonal and subjugative objects (not decisive subjects) in this social structure: how things are decided for both by the patriarchal ideology of an ancient culture which also cultivates the hierarchal snobbery and violence of the 'Touchable' towards the 'Untouchables'." In the novel *Velutha*, Ammu, Rahel and Estha are the victim of the catastrophic caste-system. Velutha has been called the "God of loss" by the writer. Velutha has not only gained an education but is a trained and "accomplished carpenter" which arouses the jealousy of other touchable workers in the pickle factory (75). In turn, Velutha receives lesser remuneration than all other workers by Mammachi even though she agrees that his "remarkable facility with his hands" could have made him "an engineer" had he not been a "Paravan"(75). Not only does Velutha rebel against the future that history and society have in store for him, but he is also a member of the Communist party, "a Naxalite"(77). He is a master carpenter and a talented craftsman. He suffers because of his being a untouchable. Velutha in Malyalam means 'Whiteness' that stands for purity. He is a pure in his heart but his complexion is black and comes of a low birth. With the result he suffers social inferiority and is socially segregated. He is deemed to be a trespasser into a touchable world. His love with Ammu is regarded as something sinful and illicit. Due to his relationship with Ammu he is socially discarded and tortured. When Sophie Mol died white Inspector Thomas Mathews helps Baby Kochamma to fabricate a case against Velutha in the alleged abduction of the two children and in the death of Sophie who died by drowning in the river. He becomes a victim to the brutality of 'touchable' policemen. He dies in the police custody:

“Blood spilled from his skull like a secret. His face was swollen and his head looked like a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from. A pumpkin with a monstrous upside-down smile. Police boots stepped back from the rim of a pool of urine spreading from him, the bright, bare electric bulb reflected in it.”(320)

Inspector Thomas Matthew is proud of his status- “He had a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters- whole touchable generations waiting in their Touchable wombs.” (Roy 245) The portrayal of Velutha shows how the untouchables are believed to be worse than animal.

The patriarchal structure with its resulting class and gender hierarchy is a more or less universal phenomenon across all nations, religions and races. The societal structure presented in *The God of Small Things* is apparently patriarchal and man is the controller of the sexual, economic, political and physical power. Husband’s power was not questioned by Mammachi. For her, patriarchy creates an “enclosure through marriage.” “A desire for equity in marriage” account for the desire for equity in power sharing. Unfortunately a woman is generally truncated, maimed and enfeebled by the institution of marriage. Pappachi enjoys thrashing his wife either with brass vase or his “ivory handled riding crop” (181). Mammachi’s physical vulnerability and Pappachi’s supremacy are established in a conventional manner but Mammachi’s dogged determination to continue the activities of the pickle factory, suggests her rebellion against total subordination. Her entry into the business world, the man’s world forbidden for woman, is a clear indication of the power she enjoys. Pappachi’s futile attempts to undermine her image of a loving dutiful wife by sewing shirt buttons in presence of visitors are a poly often used by an authority to condemn a woman. Arundhati Roy rejects these customary methods but through an alternate possibility points out the inevitability of the situation. Mammachi’s physical abuse is stopped by Chacko’s superior physical power. One day “he twisted his father’s hand” and said, “I never want this to happen again” (48).

Gender plays a very important role in discriminating between the powerful and the powerless in our patriarchal society. According to the ideology of male superiority and female inferiority, all men are empowered to exercise “right” over all women. Though Mammachi belongs to the upper class she has no right in her husband’s family. She is beaten and ill-treated. Pappachi does everything to assert his manliness. His violence, creating fear in his subjects, serves as a manifestation of his frustration. When Mammachi starts pickle making,

he does not help her though she is turning blind and he himself has retired: “He had always been a jealous man, so he greatly resented the attention his wife was suddenly getting... In the evenings, when the new visitors were expected, he would sit on the verandah and sew buttons that weren’t missing onto his shirts, to create the impression that Mammachi neglected him. To some small degree he did succeed in further corroding Ayemenem’s view of working wives.”(47-48) But after Chacko’s arrival, Chacko “caught Pappachi’s vase hand and twisted it around his back” (48). And then Pappachi never touched and talked to Mammachi again.

The ‘Paradise Pickles and Preserves’ was started by Mammachi where Ammu and Chacko also worked but Ammu never had claim on the property as she was the daughter and Chacko too always referred to it as “My factory, My pineapples, My pickles” (57). Ammu says:

“... he can’t help having a Man’s needs she said primly.... Neither Mammachi nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko’s Marxist mind and feudal libido Mammachi had a separate entrance built for Chacko’s room..., so that the objects of his ‘Needs’ wouldn’t have to go traipsing through the house.”(168-169)

Chacko had a Man’s power and none could oppose it. The women worked in his factory too were victims of his “feudal libido” because he exercised the employer’s power and a man’s power. They suffered silently because he was a man of upper caste and they needed money for their young children and old parents. Though Mammachi and Baby Kochamma approved of this arrangement, on learning of Ammu’s love for Velutha, Mammachi’s rage developed into cold contempt for her daughter:

“Her tolerance of “Men’s Needs’ as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of breeding, (The Little Blessed one, blessed personally by the Patriarch of Antioch, an imperial entomologist, a Rhodes scholar for Oxford) and brought the family to its knees (258).”

There is again, a world of difference in the treatment given to a son and daughter. Both Chacko and Ammu have chosen their spouses and both have been estranged. Both return to their ancestral home, but Ammu is considered a liability but Chacko is welcomed and doted upon. He has as many affairs as he pleases with the girls working in his factory. His mother understands his ‘man’s needs’ and makes things convenient for him by arranging a special

entrance for the girls and even paying them off. But when Ammu's affair with Velutha comes to light there is no question of 'woman's needs'.

Roy depicts that even some highly educated parents do not encourage women's education. Pappachi, Ammu's father considered the "college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (38) and so Ammu's education had suddenly come to a stop and she had no other alternative than to come with her father to Ayemenem and wait for marriage and meanwhile help her mother with housework. Chacko – unlike his sister Ammu – is sent to Oxford to complete his studies. There he falls in love with Margaret Kochamma, who marries him and soon bears him a daughter, later to divorce him for an Englishman. Consequently, Chacko returns to India and gets a job at the Madras Christian College – the reader, then, can immediately notice a certain contradiction between his communist ideals and his working for an institute allied to a religious entity. When his father dies, Chacko resigns his job as a lecturer and leaves for Ayemenem to take over his mother's business "with his Balliol Oar and his Pickle Baron dreams" (57).

On the other hand at Ayemenem Ammu felt like a captive lady, fettered to household chores and dull, mechanical routine. Her frustration for sudden disruption of education, uncongenial atmosphere at home and lack of a viable alternative through marriage made her desperate:

"All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long-suffering mother. She hatched several wretched little plans. Eventually, one worked. Pappachi agreed to her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta (38-39)."

In Calcutta Ammu met a young man who proposed to her five days after they had met. Ammu accepted the proposal of a man whom she had known so little and for such a short time, not because she had really fallen in love with him but simply because, in a fit of desperation, "she thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (39). But it soon transpired that she had actually fallen from the frying pan to fire. Disappointment became unbearable when her husband, suspended from job for alcoholism, sought to bargain by procuring his beautiful wife for his boss, Mr. Hollick, the English manager of the tea estate. Mr. Hollick suggested that he go on leave and "Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be 'looked after'" (42), Ammu's refusal only aggravated her physical

and mental torture. Her husband “grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from that effort” (42). Ammu also hit back as hard as she could. But when “his bouts of violence began to include the children” (42). Ammu had no alternative but to break off and come back with her twins (two-egg twins, born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs)- Estha and Rahel to the very same place from where she tried to run away. “Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that she had two young children. And no more dreams” (42). At the personal level she was now burdened with the liability of two children who were not really loved by anybody, and all her dreams had shattered. Although she loved them, and it was as much for them as for her sense of self-respect that she deserted her husband, they were, nevertheless, like millstones round her neck.

There is continuous subjugation, oppression, violence and injustice and conflict against ‘God of small things’ by the ‘God of big things’ in the society across the nations. The novelist expresses it through the symbols of ‘laltrain’ and ‘mombatti. The former refers to the poor and the downtrodden. They are great sufferers. The latter refers to the rich who are well fed and well protected. Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha are associated with the lower and depressed class while Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew represent the higher section of society. The conflict goes on between the conventional and the non-conventional, between the individual and the society. The conventional follow primitive way of life and insist on preserving the old order. The non-conventional like Velutha are rebellious and want to break orthodoxical norms of society. Ammu is the victim of male chauvinism and social discrimination. She is regarded as a weaker sex and inferior to men. Her alcoholic husband tortures her and reduces her to the level of a toy and forces her to his boss Mr. Hollick. She leaves her husband and comes back to Ayemenem. But her father does not believe “that an English, any Englishman, would covet another man’s wife”. Baby Kochamma resented Ammu by saying that “a married daughter had no position in her parents’ house”(45) and a divorce had no position anywhere at all. Chacko’s attitude toward her sister Ammu also is hostile. He disregarded property right of

Ammu in her family. He said to her, “what’s your is mine and what’s mine is also mine”.(47) Her tragedy reaches its climax when she indulges in love affairs with Velutha, an untouchable. When their love affairs was known by Velutha’s father, Ammu was locked in a room and was beaten up mercilessly. In the police station Inspector Thomas Mathew “tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket” (8). Ammu stared crying with her children. “she was not sobbing. Her face was set like stone but the tears welled up in her eyes and ran down her rigid cheeks. It made the twins sick with fear.”(8) At night she woke up “to escape from a familiar, recurrent dream in which policemen approached her with snicking scissors, wanting tohack her hair. They did that in kottayam to prostitutes whom they’d caught in the bazaar-branded them so that everybody would now them for what they were. Vashyas.”(161)

Estha and Rahel is twin of Christian mother and Hindu father. Deserted from their father, they lived in Ayemenem with their mother. Baby Kochamma dislikes them, “for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry”. (45)

Marginalization of women is a global phenomenon. The degree of marginalization differs from place to place. In the portrayal of Ammu’s life, Arundhati Roy has represented an exactly Indian attitude. Ammu’s childhood memories are far from pleasant. Mammachi, Ammu’s mother, thought that “what her grandchildren suffered from was far worse than Inbreeding. She meant having parents who were divorced” (61). And so far as the society in concerned her situation was a juicy topic. The relatives – near and distant— came to see her and, actually chuckled at her discomfiture while they religiously expressed their lip sympathy, so that “Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy” (43). In brief at the age of twenty- four her life came to a standstill, nothing to hope for, nothing to happen, only to spend the long uneventful days languidly one after another, and her rebellious spirit only made her more and more miserable as the days went by. At this stage when she knew that she was “already damned” she became an “unmixable mix” combining the “infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber” (44). She realized that though she lived in her parental house with mother and

brother, at her home and in her family and the society, she became virtually “untouchable”. The mood of the patriarchal society is reflected in the views of Baby Kochamma who “subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for divorced daughter – according to Baby Kochamma she had no position anywhere at all. It should be noted at this point that Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because “She saw her quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman”(45). Ammu’s own mother, her “bitter long- suffering mother’ refused to have any sympathy for her miserable daughter.

The History house, a dark and horror house, also plays an important role in the book as it is the place where Estha and Rahel hatch their plan of escape, “Because Anything can Happen to Anyone”(198). It provides the backdrop for the shattering of their world as it is the location where Velutha is violently beaten almost to death by the police and thus where Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha’s “dreams are captured and redreamed”(306). When Chacko explains the history of their anglophile family to the twins, he states “history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside”(52). Roy metaphorically connects Chacko’s anglophile family to a postcolonial India that according to Chacko has been “trapped outside”(53). The History House had been owned by an Englishman, Kari Saipu, who had “gone native” and is thus perceived as a symbol of the English colonization of India (52).

The history house becomes the symbol of Indian history where Indians have been “locked out” of their past with their “ancestors whispering inside.”(52-3). Indians cannot understand their ancestors’ words because, “Our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures our dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves.”(53). The war that Chacko is talking about is India’s freedom, which India has won and yet lost because of the adverse effects of globalization, which have led to an almost identical colonization of India by multinational corporations. This is evident in the changes that the History house experiences with time for when Rahel returns to Ayemenen, the History house has been transformed into a Heritage Hotel, with “Toy histories for rich tourists to play in.”(126)

The Meenachal river signifies the dangers of the politics of darkness. It takes away the life of Sophie Mol and spells doom on the twins of the Ipe family. It is the secret rendezvous of Ammu and Velutha and later Velutha embraces his misfortune and ominous death there. By crossing the borders of the river symbolically, they have committed black-act. The Meenachal also functions symbolically as the space in which Velutha can be free to “drift slowly” with the current” (315), unhindered by societal dictates, the space wherein the law ceases to operate, the metaphorical “river of life.” When Ammu sees Velutha, she is aware that “as he rose from the dark water - - - she saw that the world they stood in was his” (315) and during their intimacy Ammu was “wide and deep as a river in spate.” (318) Within the river, the laws had no sway.

Thus the world of darkness overshadows the world of life of hope. Arundhati Roy has beautifully presented all the ills of the society in the *God of Small Things*. If there would be no caste system, no gender bias and marginalization of women, lower caste, children etc., something good will come. Ammu love affairs with Velutha will be recognized, women and untouchable will get equal rights which will usher a new world.

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