

Arundati Rai's *The God of Small Things* – A Post-Colonial Reading

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The adjective “post colonial” signifies the notion that the novel or be it any piece of writing for that matter, goes beyond every possible parameters of the locality, region and nation to participate in the global scenario today which is an aftermath of European colonization. *The God of Small Things* written in the post colonial Anglophone by Arundhati Roy does reveal a decisive post colonial condition; through its dialogues, characters and various events and instances it encompass. Ms Roy refers to the metaphor “the heart of darkness” in the novel which is a sort of ridiculous reference to Conrad’s novel *the heart of darkness*. She 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 *God of Small Things* tells the story of one family in the town of Ayemenem in Kerala, India. The temporal setting shifts back and forth from 1969, when Rahel and Estha, a set of fraternal twins are 7 years old, to 1993, when the twins are reunited at age 31. The novel begins with Rahel returning to her childhood home in Ayemenem, India, to see her twin brother Estha, who has been sent to Ayemenem by their father. Events flash back to Rahel and Estha’s birth and the period before their mother Ammu divorced their father. Then the narrator describes the funeral of Sophie Mol, Rahel and Estha’s cousin, and the point after the funeral when Ammu went to the police station to say that a terrible mistake had been made. Two weeks after this point, Estha was returned to his father.

The narrator briefly describes the twins’ adult lives before they return to Ayemenem. In the present, Baby Kochamma gloats that Estha does not speak to Rahel just as he does not speak to anyone else, and then the narrator gives an overview of Baby Kochamma’s life. Rahel looks out the window at the building that used to contain the family business, Paradise Pickles and Preserves, and flashes back to the circumstances surrounding Sophie Mol’s death. Through flashbacks Roy is telling a story about what happened in the family when Estha and Rahel were young. Horrible memories are revealed, like the smarmy soda salesman selling yellow, sweet sodas; Sophie Mol’s death; and the forbidden love with an untouchable.

In “Black Skin, White Masks”, Fanon (psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary, and a major post colonial author) suggests that colonialism, with its explicit conceptual under-pinnings of white racial superiority over non-white peoples, has created a sense of division and alienation in the self-identity of the non-white colonized people. The history, culture, language, customs and beliefs of the white colonizers are imposed on the colonized and they are eventually coaxed to consider them as universal, normative and superior to their own local indigenous culture. This creates a strong sense of inferiority in the colonized subject and leads to an adoption of the language, culture and customs of the colonizers by the colonized as a way of compensating for these feelings of inferiority in their self-identity. This creates a divided sense of self in the subject formation of the colonized.

Through this study I intend to do a post colonial analysis of the novel. “Post colonialism”, the term itself is in want of a cohesive definition. It contains within it historical and geographical notions. All post colonial experiences are nearly the same regardless of history. To conquer, to subjugate, to occupy and to dominate another being are all intrinsic colonial stops. This discussion has also been formulated against issues like identity, hybridity, cultural differences and conflict. Roy’s novel, even though complex, incoherent and fragmented, conveys a deeper meaning that runs into notions regarding human perspectives, values and attitudes of a post colonial nation. The relation between India and English has been a long and troublesome one. In India, the cultural impact of imperialism dominated the urban elite class and the semi-westernized upper and lower middle classes. The women writers of post colonial India too hail from either elite or moderate backgrounds and their writings reflected their experiences.

Here, Arundhati Roy, we see her capitalize on her straddling of different cultures as an Indian writer writing in English by making this a crucial element in the identities of her major protagonists. The twins portrayed in the novel are often found speaking Malayalam and English. Their world itself is plotted by a whole range of western references. Rahel expresses her love for her mother Ammu by quoting Kipling’s *Jungle Book*: “We be of one blood, ye and I” (Pg no 329). We also find that Estha is an ardent fan of Elvis Presley. These can be traced as instances of self-betrayal. They identify themselves with things and people which are alien to them. It is like forging a new identity; a new English identity.

Their uncle Chacko quotes verbatim from the *Great Gatsby*, the story of another “oxford man” (pg no 38). There are instances in the novel where the children are deliberately pushed into an anglicized mode of thought and living. Awareness of English language was given more priority and the parents and guardians always took care of the fact that

their children, nieces or nephews excelled in the language of the Angl-land. Uncle Chacko describes a war scene in which he uses the word “despise” (pg 53) which was a difficult word and Estha and Rahel were made to look it up in the dictionary for the apt meaning. Another instance in the novel in which Ammu says that “Pappachi was incurable British CCP.... and in Hindi it meant shit wiper. Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was anglophile. He made Estha and Rahel look up anglophile in the Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary” (pg 52). When Sophie Mol, Rahel and Estha’s cousin comes down from London, Mammachi (their grandmother) is extremely apprehensive about her grandchildren’s ability to speak English fluently. She surreptitiously listens to the twins speaking and punished them if they spoke in Malayalam or if they made mistakes while speaking in English. Such an ardent obsession with the imperial language and codes is typical of a post colonial community, where an involuntary subservience to the imperial hordes and an ingrained devotion to their modes and customs typify their psyche. Sophie Mol, their English cousin was presented to them as ideal. She is constantly compared to Rahel and Estha, leaving them depressed and embittered. “Sophie Mol is loved from the beginning even before she arrives and when she died the loss of Sophie Mol became more important than her memory.” (pg 186). Hybridity occurs in post colonial societies both as a result of conscious movements of cultural suppression, as when the colonial power invades to consolidate political and economic control, or when settler-invaders disposes indigenous peoples and force them to “assimilate” to new social patterns. It may also occur in later periods when patterns of immigration from metropolitan societies and from other imperial areas of influence [...] continue to produce complex cultural palimpsests with the post colonial world.

Frantz Fanon talks about such a divided sense of the self in his “Black Skin, White Masks”. He says “As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it.”

Skin colour and race are seen to create a very different sort of power structure. A white skin is an ideal of beauty which leaves anyone with dark skin in a lower bracket. The impression that Sophie Mol leaves for herself is, “hatted, bell bottomed and loved from the beginning (pg 186). This out of the bounds glorification of the west is peculiar of the entire family’s behavior especially in Baby Kochamma’s. The sense of inferiority complex at being Indian makes her speak with an artificial accent and ask Sophie Mol questions on Shakespeare’s “Tempest”. “All this was of course primarily to announce her credentials to Margaret Kochamma (Chacko’s English wife). To set herself apart from the

Sweeper class” (pg 144).

The spread of English throughout the globe via colonialism trade and commerce has resulted in the emergence of a number of accomplished writers today including Roy who is a representative of such a cultural blend that looms large over the whole world. In *The God of Small things* Roy strikes a phrase “led out of the history house” which connotes different levels of meaning other than the peripheral one. It means that we are people who are forced into an anglicized pattern of thinking and practice which is enabled by the public school education established by the colonial rulers. Roy herself is a representative of such a phenomenon. As Chacko exclaims in the novel “we are the prisoners of war. Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough, our joys never happy enough, our dreams never big enough, our lives never important enough to matter” (pg 53). It is quite true to say so. The post colonial mind is a fragmented post-war ground; a war that’s won and lost. Edward Said (Palestinian American literary theorist, cultural critic) argues that the West had dominated the East for more than 2,000 years, since the composition of “The Persians” by Aeschylus. Europe had dominated Asia politically so completely for so long that even the most outwardly objective Western texts on the East were permeated with a bias that even most Western scholars could not recognize. His contention was not only that the West has conquered the East politically but also that Western scholars have appropriated the exploration and interpretation of the Orient’s languages, history and culture for themselves. Such a cultural adoption and moulding it to suit their tastes finds expression in Roy’s novel. Almost all the major characters in the novel are live expressions of such a converted cultural mould.

The power structures are carefully delineated in the novel. Mammachi, Baby kochamma, the policemen etc stand aloof within their realms of power and they see to it that the transgressors- Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha, who hold no power in the social hierarchies, remain vulnerable and hence overruled. It is quite a notable fact that the characters in the novel although they have adopted the Western ways to suit their needs they remain stubbornly centered onto the power structures their tradition had bestowed upon them. Pappachi (Estha and Rahel’s grandfather), for instance, he is the British entomologist who is hailed a British gentleman in the whole of Ayemenem. Even after his retirement he refuses to go around in Indian clothes and followed Western suiting. He drove a Plymouth and smoked a cigar. Despite all the outwardly British trappings he remained a chauvinist at heart. He beat his wife and children and he resented his wife’s success at the pickle factory and her ability to play violin. The children who the are

“small things” in the novel are the worst affected of all. They go against the rule and make velutha, who is a “paravan”, an untouchable, their God – The God of small things. He is their best friend, because he lets them be, and also becomes a part of their world. As Rahel grows up she realizes “it is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought, to ruin a fragment of a dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do” (pg 190). The powerless being taken advantage of by the powerful. The orange- lemon drink man sexually exploits Estha at the film theatre and leaves him frightened and insecure. “The orange drink lemon drink man knew where to find him. In the factory in Ayemenem. On the banks of the Meenachal” (pg 140).

“In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern - a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern....Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'...They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern.” (From Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 's “Can the subaltern Speak”). In the novel “the other” has been made out of the children, Velutha and even Ammu. At some point of time or the other, they are discriminated against; the children by Ammu and their grand aunt Baby kochamma, Ammu by her aunt and velutha by the so called “modalalis”(land lords) of the clan.

In Roy's *The God of Small things*, the English figure as a typical colonizer in the form of Mr. Hollick and as a liberated decolonizer as Father Mulligan who is a spiritually elevated man. Ammu's husband, Babu, almost lost his job due to excessive alcoholism and he requests his “superior” Mr. Hollick (Babu's boss at the Assam tea estate) not to sack him. To which Hollick says “well actually there maybe an option... perhaps we could work something out...you are a very lucky man-wonderful family, beautiful children, an extremely attractive wife” (pg 41). He shamefully suggests that Ammu should to be sent to his Bungalow to be “looked after” (pg 42). The appearance of British as exploiters suggests a post-colonial tendency. They act as instruments of imperial oppression trying to crush down the colonized to the very extent of extreme pathos. Characters like Hollick symbolize the cruelty and carnality of the superior planter class. They strike a glaring contrast to the impoverished labour class. A recent tendency shows a shift in stance in terms of portraying English as paragons of cruelty. They cease to be dark figures of villainy and crime. They are portrayed as more

individualized and aware. Such a newer version of the British figure as Father Mulligan in the novel. He is a priest in Ayemenem and later he relinquishes Christianity and takes up Hinduism and becomes an ardent follower of Lord Vishnu. Despite the knowledge of Baby Kochamma's (Ammu's aunt) staunch affection for him, he never takes advantage of her and remains on friendly terms with her until his death.

The God of small things presents life in "God's own country" as quite ungodly. Against the Godly scenery of Kerala the characters find them sinned against, their childhood – innocence raped and their lives ruined. What to Naipaul is an area of darkness, to Roy is the Heart of darkness. But both are of interest and entertainment for the readers as it clearly brings out those forces which vie for control over the outcastes and the down castes. The "Big things", inspite of their individual difference unite whenever they face a threat from "Small things". The "Small things" –Ammu, the twins and Velutha, who get together for mutual love and warmth and not for any material gains are crudely acted upon and destroyed. They leave behind no memory of pain or concern in the minds of the survivors. Their every mark is completely wiped off. The novel carries with it throughout its main, the disturbing motif of the "permanent distancing of 'the other' from the mainstream life and their ultimate transgression by the mainstream powerful class.

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