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**A STUDY ON ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL 'THE  
GOD OF SMALL THINGS'**

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# A Study on Arundhati Roy's Novel 'The God of Small Things'

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**Abstract – Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a polysemic novel which can be interpreted at several levels. It may be said that the novel is a satire on politics attacking specifically the Communist establishment. It may be treated as a family saga narrating the story of four generations of a Christian family. It may also be treated as a novel having religious overtones: One may also call it a protest novel which is subversive and taboo-breaking.**

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## INTRODUCTION

*The God of Small Things* throws light upon hierarchical structures of power and oppression at various levels in patriarchal societies. Arundhati Roy explores how these differences of caste, class, gender, race, function through social institutions and the way they affect human interactions and relationships. The novel really created a stir when it first appeared and when it specially fetched the prestigious Booker Prize for literature. The theme of the novel, indeed, touched the hearts of all critics across the world while its language annoyed their concept of standards.

Arundhati Roy's fresh perspectives on an age-old tradition created waves as rebellion against the social injustice meted out both to the downtrodden and to the women. In this way, Roy using her lively original language, sensitive poetic style, deep feelings, shocking emotions and a novel approach, has really achieved a mark of eminence in helping us to overcome 'man's inhumanity to man'.

*The God of Small Things* reacts against fatalism, as women particularly recognize the boundaries that society has placed upon them. Through her work social cultural, political, and sexual limitations are represented by images of physical and social enclosures. She intends to show the realistic image of the world.

She presents a panoramic view of society and understands the effect of history on the individual. The focus of her entire work is the vision of the struggle between individual freedom and physical, psychological, political, and social restraints. *The God*

*of Small Things* deals with the tribulation of women as daughter and wife in patriarchal society. Women have become victims of gender oppression.

The feminist in Arundhati Roy takes stock of the situation by partially dwelling upon the theme of gender bias by referring to Mammachi's discriminatory attitude towards Ammu. A daughter estranged from her husband is made to feel unwanted in her parents' home whereas an estranged son not only receives warm welcome, he remains the rightful inheritor of the family fortune. Profligacy in him is encouraged in the name of 'Man's Needs'. Whereas identical behaviour in a girl decrees torture of being locked up in a room. What is desired and facilitated in case of a girl as evident from Ammu-Velutha relationship?

*The God of Small Things* can be read as a story of crime and punishment, of pride and nemesis. Arundhati Roy examines how various characters in the novel suffer as a consequence of breaking certain inalienable laws which human beings have to obey if they have to live in a civilized society. While she is offering a scathing critique of societal laws, which oppress the underprivileged, the marginalized and the defenseless, she also shows how certain laws, which human beings have to obey by virtue of their being human beings, have punishment written into them almost deterministically. The cycle of the twenty years in the life of the Aye Menem family moves with 'Karmic' irrevocability. It is as if one has to bear the fruits of one's Karma in this life itself.

*The God of Small Things* enacts the external drama of confrontation between the powerful and the

powerless. The author has desisted from making a woman's powerlessness as the central crisis. Both, men and women are projected as a victim or a tyrant. It must be admitted that a women's loss of power is treated very sympathetically, and yet, there is no obsession with women's ineffectual condition in society. The psychological, economic and social problems that play a major role in the novel, devastate men and woman alike.

It is a modern novel in its theme and the treatment of the theme, a postmodern novel in its knotting and knitting of narrative threads, manipulation of expressive literary forms and creative 'play' with words, a feminist novel in the pity and terror that it evokes for the condition of women in a particular cultural milieu, a political novel in its criticism of the hypocrisy of the communist party, an autobiographical novel in the way the facts of the author's life have been distilled into a verbal artifact and so on. In fact the novel is eminently amenable to multiple approaches and interpretations.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy attempts to sensitize the male chauvinist and extremely traditional society to the cruelty of its treatment of women and low caste people and register her protest against its dehumanizing taboos which thwart individual's dreams, longings and claims for justice and respectability. She brings a freshness of imagination and linguistic inventiveness to bear on a long-abiding social ill which our social reformers had stigmatized as the greatest blot on Indian culture and centuries of exploitation and suffering that have been the lot of Indian women and untouchables.

*The God of Small Things* is the story of lives caught in the web of social relationships and the compulsions of history. The Ipes of Ayemenem are a large family of caste Christians who in the criss-cross of their public and private interactions, reveal on the one hand, the dynamics of the political and patriarchal, the economic and religious hierarchies of power that constitute society, and on the other, the defined, delimited roles of the individuals that constitute these hierarchies. The architectonic tension in the novel builds along the interface between these two, showing up in the process, antagonisms inherent in the very constitution of the two forces. The one cannot exist without the other, yet the two are incompatible to a large extent.

Arundhati Roy through the means of storytelling questions the system of powers and attempts to change it through the power embodied in literature. Kate Millet has pointed out: 'when a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely a need to speak itself aloud when its working is exposed and questioned it becomes not only subjected to discussion, but even to change'. It is very interesting to note that in the text Roy has carried out covertly the emasculation of men by women and also emasculation of woman but not in the conventional derogatory

sense. Her women learn to think and act independently and take on the role of protector but in the process do not sacrifice their feminine qualities.

One of the dominant socio-political concerns in Arundhati's novel is the rigid caste-structure to be seen in India. 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'. Unfortunately, in the present-day Indian society, this is not to be, and the inevitable consequence is tragic and claustrophobic. The weaker sections of our society - like the paravans. The scheduled castes and the have -nots - inescapably suffer a good deal in the process of caste-stratifications.

Typical themes in Indian fiction are said to be "the caste system, social attitude, social and religious taboos, superstitions, notions superiority and inferiority". *The God of Small Things* deals with most of the mentioned themes along with the most elemental of human emotions, i.e., love. It is true, the story of love is never complete; recounted many times, it has never been told to the end because it has been, as Herman Melville says, "the endless flowing river in the cave of man". Arundhati Roy links her narrative of the destinies of small things and their small gods caught in 'a hopelessly practical world' to the all-time epic stories that theme this conflict between self and society and between the dispossessed individual and the empowered representatives of social hegemony. The repeated association of river and sea, symbols of the eternal flow of life, with the Ayemenem house and its inmates are significant from this point of view. All this lifts the characters above the smallness of their canvas and makes them representatives in the eternal drama of the confrontation between the individual's desire and dignity and the dominating structures of society. The business of art that of lifting the common into the uncommon, and the commonplace into the beautiful, of sculpting the mundane into the felt truth of universal experience, is thus accomplished.

The novel is set in Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala. The plot and theme as it unfolds with the stories of the characters specially Velutha, Ammu, Baby Kochamma, Chacko and of course the unforgettable twins Rahel and Estha and the guest of special honour Sophie Mol, is a microscopic representation of the macroscopic world. No doubt certain incidents, topographical descriptions, reactions are typically Indian, but in general the class conflict, gender bias, the story of love and hate, jealousy have universal application.

There are three generations of men and women in the world created by Arundhati Roy in her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. Baby Kochamma and Father Mulligan represent the generation born in pre-Independence Kerala. Mammachi and Pappachi also

belong to the same generation. They have sometimes impulses and urges that defy the age-old norms of patriarchy but they are not able to make a decisive choice and have their way in a largely traditional society. Margaret Kochamma and Ammu represent the intermediate generation that defies the dominate sexual norms of the time and the latter in particular, pays a heavy price for doing so. Rahel and Estha represent the contemporary generation born in post-Independence Indian that doesn't seem to have any feudal, patriarchal hang-over and lives a life free from inhibitions and repressions of Syrian Christians in Kerala.

Arundhati Roy depicts Ayemenem, where the moss green Meenachal river flows, through the town and the canals rowed by women and children on their way to market and forms a backdrop which is far removed from the tumultuous happenings of other modern novels. Her references to food, clothing, landscape, political climate at that time, all references to the region are exploited for non-regional purposes. It is out of this adroit use of regional touches that Roy creates a universal story of love and tragedy told through the eyes of seven year old twins. The style is one of an extremely self-conscious person who has extraordinary control over it and the language she uses is full of literary allusions. Roy's humour and feel for the language brings out the irony and pathos in the novel. She twists the language to suit her own story telling. She has invented a new idiom and vocabulary to tell the story of Mammachi, Sophie Mol, Estha, Rahel, Ammu and Velutha.

Apart from the narrative style and language, she shows tremendous skill in portraying the oppression of characters at different levels of society. She introduces the power structure in society and shows how the more powerful victimise the less powerful as there is gender oppression, oppression of the lower caste, subjugation of children, police atrocity, and the hypocrite Marxist leader Mr. Pillai who too doesn't leave the opportunity to oppress anybody for personal gains. It is also ironical that the Church makes a distinction between lower caste and upper caste. When Ammu marries outside her caste, she is an outcaste unaccepted by the Syrian Christians. She doesn't even get a proper burial after her death. It is also ironical to see Mr. Pillai using Marxism for personal gains rather than for poor labourers or the lower caste. Mr. Pillai refuses to help Velutha when the latter needs his help saying "Party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life". Marxism which was committed to the eradication of caste system by providing equal status to the labourers in the society is heard echoing Mr. Pillai's words that it couldn't fight for it was Velutha's personal matter. Such a discrepancy in Mr. Pillai's acts and ideals brings out the hypocrisy of such Marxists.

## CONCLUSION

The structure of society presented in *The God of Small Things* is apparently patriarchal and man is the controller of the sexual, economic, political and physical power. The power of the husband is 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."

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* reveals her commitment to the present world as she perceives it and convinces the reader of her belief system. She analyses the relationship of individuals and the society, the rational and irrational elements in human psyche. Through her prolific work she has acquired a reputation as one of the most intelligent by differentiating of contemporary English novelists. Her reputation rested primarily on her status as a committed realist writer.

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