

Transcendence of Boundaries and the Operation of Power Structures in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The Booker Prize winning *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is a highly political novel that revolves around the lives of the fraternal twins Estha and Rahel. A strain of pessimism touches throughout the strands of the non-linear narration of the novel. The novel discusses issues of sex, caste, religion etc. in the most obvious manner. It lays bare the double standards of the society, and the overt gap between preaching and practice. *The God of Small Things* questions how certain people are relegated to the margins, and how crossing the prescribed limits take a heavy toll on their lives. The people in authority, be it the institutions of law, religion or education have formulated different laws for different people. The indifference Ammu faces is mainly because of the fact that she is a woman, who is “unworthy” of being educated. Similarly, Velutha’s relationship with Ammu was at the cost of his life. The paper seeks to demarcate the establishments of power the novel discusses and how in close association are these establishments with the boundaries or the limits they dictate. The boundaries make a clear distinction of who the powerful are and who aren’t, since only the former have the capability to prescribe who should stand where.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, power structures, marginalization, relationships.

Introduction

“They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory.” (Roy 31)

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is set in Ayemenem, a place in the district of Kottayam in Kerala. The novel is built upon the concept of boundaries, which enables a clear demarcation of places, people, events and actions in the novel. Boundaries are closely associated with the power structures, since both of them have significant influence over each other. These boundaries attribute power to certain groups, while depriving the rest to the status of the Other. The novel presents a gamut of characters, ranging from the Dizygotic twins Estha and Rahel to the Imperial Entomologist Pappachi. All characters can be observed as transcending the limits set on them either by the society, family or even themselves in one way or the other. The question of who sets the limit, and creates the laws is of importance and is asked by the narrator time and again.

The novel opens with a comparison of the months of May and June, when in the latter the countryside turns to an “immodest green” (Roy 1). The immodesty might be due to its reluctance to stick to the mould set by the authority. The bluebottles, without knowing the limits enforced upon them, hit themselves against the windowpanes and die. Quite evidently can the condition of the bluebottles be compared with that of Velutha, who had to meet with the predicament of his own death for not abiding by the “laws”. The cultural context of India is much familiar with the cases of honorary killings where either a member or both be killed when they enter a love relationship or marriage disregarding the age-old caste system. The characters in the novel traverse the geographical, social, physical and psychological boundaries laid on them.

All members of the Ayemenem family leave their ancestral home at some point of their life. The shift of the whole family to and from Delhi for Pappachi’s job; Chacko’s migration to England for higher education; Ammu’s journey to Calcutta to visit her aunt and from there to Assam following her marriage; Baby Kochamma to Madras for her training; Estha to be Returned, and Rahel for her higher education are all a part of geographical transcendence, and the objective of this movement differs from character to character. Margaret Kochamma decides on spending the Christmas at Ayemenem to recover from her sense of alienation. Baby Kochamma through her T.V is in a way crossing the boundaries that separate people. The plants in her garden are allowed to grow free and wild, and through them Baby Kochamma might have been aiming at the liberation of her suppressed desires for Father Mulligan.

Instances of physical imposition extends further when Chacko acts as an intruder to *Paradise Pickles and Preserves* which initially was a project of Mammachi, but as he came back from London and took the factory over, Mammachi was reduced to the status of a sleeping partner. Even when Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, she had no legal claim to the property because of the mere fact that she is a woman. The Meenachal River is categorized by the children into different sections like the Really Deep and the Other Side. If they hadn’t attempted to cross the river, the fate of the characters would have been different.

History and the Love Laws dictated by the authors of history restricted the relationship of Ammu and Velutha by classifying Velutha to the category of the Untouchables. Ammu and Velutha transgresses the prescribed laws that disapproved their relationship and enters both in a physical and love relationship. On seeing Ammu on the riverbank for the first time, Velutha feels a sudden chill doubting Ammu to be a “delectable bait” arranged by the “people in the bushes” (Roy 334). The people hiding in the bushes could be the makers of the history, the creators of the discourses that are the people in power. It was instinctual and blameless from the part of Velutha to have the qualms since such cons are a part of his everyday life. The discourse that governed Velutha and Ammu was framed by the Touchable patriarchal society, that laid different rules for different people, and assumed itself as the centre of everything.

The patriarchal power produces the reality, and “truth”, but the same discourse acts differently for the powerful. Mammachi turned a blind eye towards Chacko’s libertine relationships with the factory women. The concern of them belonging to the Untouchables doesn’t affect Mammachi since she saw that only as a part of “a Man’s Needs” (Roy 168). “Neither Mammachi nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko’s Marxist mind and feudal libido” (Roy 168). Mammachi is a product of the patriarchal construction, who concedes to Chacko’s relationships, but takes the cost of a life when it came to Ammu. Mammachi secretly gave the factory women some money so that they’d keep everything a secret. The women who were in need of money due to their young children, old parents, and drunk husbands were being exploited by the people with the money power.

Mammachi’s distinguished treatment for Chacko can evidently be traced throughout the course of the novel. For Mammachi, since her husband was almost non-existent in her life after Chacko’s threat, her son became “Her Man. Her Only Love” (Roy 168). Features of Jocasta Complex can be traced here, since Mammachi was highly inclined to Chacko and did anything for his welfare. *Analytical Psychology* defines Jocasta Complex thus: “It is an obsessive fixation of mother on her son, which is intensified by latent desire and creation of an adoration cult of son”. Even at the time of Sophie mol’s funeral, Mammachi was more devastated by the sorrow of Chacko than by the death itself. Mammachi was forever indebted to Chacko, for him being the one who saved her from the violence instigated by Pappachi. “Her tolerance of ‘Men’s Needs’ as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter” (Roy 258). While Chacko’s emotionless physical relations were acceptable in nature for Mammachi, she finds Ammu’s love for Velutha as defiling the generations.

Ammu and Chacko had separate laws to abide by beginning from their youth, as can be seen in the case with their education. After their completion of school education, Pappachi felt it “an unnecessary expense” to give college education for a girl (Roy 38). Ammu crosses the boundary when she got a chance as she took advantage of her visit to her aunt at Calcutta, where she meets Baba and marries him. Ammu boldly moves out of the marriage when she found it necessary. It is a common thought widespread among the patriarchal society that women shouldn’t have much education, for that is either unnecessary or will make them defiant.

A development in the self-reliant nature of Ammu can be witnessed, as the narrator points out how Ammu had in her, “The Unmixable Mix – the infinite tenderness of motherhood, the reckless rage of a suicide bomber” (Roy 321). Ammu transgresses Baby Kochamma’s expectations and goes to the police station to enquire about Velutha. Baby Kochamma never thought of Ammu publicly admitting her relationship with Velutha. She discarded the feelings of Ammu by saying that it was only a “Small Price to Pay”, while in effect it destroyed four lives (Roy 336). The dichotomy of the “Men’s Needs” and the “Small Price” is created and the importance is determined by those in power.

Married women aren’t given a place in their ancestral home, and when a woman like Ammu, divorced from an inter-faith marriage comes back to her ancestral home she is unwelcomed. But paradoxically, Margaret Kochamma was coming back to her ex-husband and was given a grand

welcome at his house, though Mammachi despises her. When Estha and Rahel are called “millstones”, the whole family stages a play to please Sophie when she arrives. Sophie’s arrival draws a division in the course of novel, by dividing the events that precedes and succeeds Sophie’s arrival. The status and power that the characters attribute to the West is also revealed. Every action of the family members upon Margaret’s arrival revolve around the apprehension of “What will Sophie Mol think?”. The attribute of being white delineates a clear division between Sophie Mol and the twins. Baby Kochamma’s attempts to prove her knowledge in front of Margaret and Sophie, Chacko’s dressing up for the arrival of his family, Baby Kochamma’s focus on the twins’ pronunciation of English are all pointers towards their obsession with the West.

Comrade Pillai’s admiration for Rahel’s arrival from America, his acts of being proud to have a guest like Chacko at his house, his urgency to showcase Lenin’s talent to deliver English speech are also some other instances of the obsession Indians have towards the West. Contrary to the admiration, we could see how Margaret’s father hated her decision to marry an Indian, for he felt Indians to be sly and dishonest. Thus, a clear demarcation of power distribution can be seen throughout the novel. The preoccupation with the Imperialist power can also be noted in Pappachi’s disbelief in Ammu’s story, for according to him none of the English men could covet another man’s wife. Comrade Pillai’s conscious inclusion of English phrases, the exclamation of the lady in Estha’s train at his proficiency in the language are also some other examples.

The prominent classification, the novel makes is that of the Touchables and the Untouchables. While Ammu’s family belongs to the Touchables, Velutha and his father are Untouchables, who are left unconcerned by the mainstream communities. “Their Work, abandoned by God and History, by Marx, by Man, by Woman, and by Children, lay folded on the floor” (Roy 310). The limited opportunities the Untouchables had is brought to light as Mammachi admits how Velutha would’ve been an expert engineer if he wasn’t from the lower caste. Thus their caste, and the prejudices of the people restricts them to the lower strata of the society.

Velutha and his ancestors converted into Christianity to escape the mistreatments and marginalization they faced as Untouchables among the Hindus, and that resulted in them having a separate church with a separate bishop, thereby marginalized yet without availing any benefits from the government. Neither their religious orientation nor their political orientation saves them from their crises. Ironically enough, it was Rahel’s great grandfather who built a school at Ayemenem for the Untouchables.

The Marxist ideology which aims at the creation of an egalitarian society is defied through Comrade Pillai, who abandons Velutha and refuses to provide a support for him. Comrade’s apathy to the needs of the factory workers, and his attempts to fool them by pretending his concern are quite contradictory to the Marxist principles. At one point, Comrade Pillai even urges Chacko to send Velutha off from the Factory. Marxism aims at the creation of a classless society, but here the actions of the so-called “Communists” like Comrade Pillai and Chacko contributes to intensify the gap between the classes. Chacko exploits the women workers of the Factory through his “Needs” and the

other workers by not granting the deserved wages for them. This segregation follows the Untouchables even after their death, for they are buried in the “themmadikuzhy” (the pauper’s pit). The same institutions which are meant to protect the rights of people, like the political parties, religious institutions, police force act as the primary perpetrators of inequality, “As though they were the leash and he (Velutha) were the dog. History walking the dog” (Roy 288).

The dizygotic twins, Rahel and Estha, overcome the physical separation birth had given them, through possessing a single Siamese soul, “Because whatever She was, He was too” (Roy 86). Despite the fact that they are Dizygotic, and non-Siamese, they had a single soul that connected them wherever they were. All throughout their childhood, “Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us.” (Roy 2). Instances are there when they were able to share even their dreams- Rahel caught herself one-night chuckling at a funny dream Estha had. But after twenty-three years, “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks, and Limits” began appearing on their separate horizons (Roy 3). The circumstances and the people associated with them have forced the separation between them. Roy even makes a clear border of the tiptoeing of the children’s childhood and the sliding in of silence through the “Yes” of Estha.

Each character finds varied alternatives to transcend the boundaries. While the twins use their souls to blur the boundaries, Ammu and Velutha finds sex as the means to do so. Ammu draws a definite line between what is “dirty” and what is not. She expects the children not to blow spit-bubbles, and not to make themselves dirty. But as the novel reaches the end Ammu, out of her love for Velutha disregards her worries about getting dirty, and have the intercourse with Velutha on the river bank, by being one with nature. Pappachi can be seen as violating the physical boundaries and intruding into the space of Mammachi by means of domestic violence. Pappachi could never accept Mammachi growing independent over him or establishing an enterprise herself. For him, violence was a way to exercise his power over the other, and a way to vent out the depression of his unachieved aspirations. Estha and Rahel also employ incest as an instrument to build the gap time and people had imposed upon them.

Every event the novel depicts has some association with the power structures, on whose leash the powerless and the people of the Small Things are mere puppets. The difference in the treatment of the elephant, Kochu Tomban can also be seen as ironical, for his cremation consumed eighty tins of pure ghee, while many of the people struggled to find a living. It can be observed how Ammu stops her children from the “proprietary handling” of her body as “It was Hers”, and it was her right what to do with her body which she does in every situation (Roy 222). She decides to withdraw from Baba’s marriage, when her body was treated as an object of pleasure; from the pampering of her body by her children; and she was in authority of her body and that she decides to share with Velutha.

Conclusion

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is an account of the lives of the people of Ayemenem, who were influenced and ruled by the social structures around them. As the title suggests, being an Untouchable, Velutha is the God of Small Things, and the God of Loss while the people at

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the top level of the hierarchy make decisions on the Big Things in the world. The police officer knows how to twist the laws without hampering his reputation; Comrade Pillai directs every situation in his own favour. Even Margaret Kochamma's marriage with Chacko can be observed as an attempt to rebel against herself, a mode of psychological transcendence, after being too much servient to the rules of the society.

“They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers' grandmothers, uncles' uncles, mothers' mothers, cousins' cousins, jam jam, jelly jelly” (Roy 31)

All characters of the novel crossed their territories, the intensity of the effect of which varied, and of them a few had to sacrifice their lives. The laws that determine how grandmothers, mothers, jam, jellies are expected to be are framed by the influential lot. While the patriarchal society makes laws on women, government does it with the consistency of jam, the rich on the poor, the Touchables on the Untouchables, Bourgeoisie on the proletariat etc. This hierarchy of power influences the lives of everyone in different levels. How far have we come and how much have we transcended the established societal structures are a matter of grave importance in a century when the choices people make are capable of killing them, whether that be the religion they follow, the food they eat or the person they choose to live with. As long as there exist the boundaries dictating who one is and how important it is to know one's own place, *The God of Small Things* will stand the test of time questioning all social norms and the standards instituted by the people in power.

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