
Dominant Themes in Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*

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Arundhati Roy is an Indian author and activist who shot into fame after winning the 1998 Booker prize for fiction for her novel, *The God of Small Things*. Early in her career, Roy worked for televisions and movies. She wrote the screenplay for *In which Annie gives it those ones* (1989) and *Electric Moon* (1992). The publication of *The God of Small Things* catapulted Roy to instant inter-national fame. The book keeps all the promises that it makes. The book is the description of how the small things in life affect people's behaviour and their lives.

The God of Small Things is probably, more than anything else, a novel about family. It explores the relationships between brother and sister, mother and child, grandparents and grandchildren and so on. It is set in a village of Ayemenem in Kottajam district of Kerala. The story deals with various themes like untouchability, gender discrimination, cast system, and incestuous relation.

The novelist analyses the gender oppressions through the examination of marital and inter gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi and Rahel. All these female characters are resourceful and belong to the affluent class but they are deprived in fully realizing their capabilities. As Isaac Pocock, Jr., a nineteenth century English dramatist and painter, rightly holds:

Oh say not woman's love is bought
With vain and empty treasure
Oh say not woman's heart is caught
By every idle pleasure
Deep in her heart the passion glows,
She loves and loves forever. (*Advanced English Essays* 95)

This is what Arundhati Roy wants to express in the novel, *The God of Small Things*. Arundhati Roy belongs to that area of literature which deals with a truthful portrayal of the plight of women in society and their marathon struggle for seeking the sense of 'identity' in a male dominated conservative framework. The social structure of an Indian woman is full of many ups and downs, ifs and buts. Life offers little choice for a forsaken woman like Ammu, the central character, who yearns for pleasure and happiness and a life far from constraints. The narrator portrays a detailed picture of Ammu's life from childhood to adolescence, and from the experience of marriage to being an affectionate mother.

As a little girl, Ammu had to face cares and anxieties, fret and fever of life. She had seen the cruelty of her father who used to beat her and her mother. She was also deprived of higher education because according to Pappachi (her father) college education was not at all useful for girls. He behaved like a decent man but demonstrated his male ego and mentality when he tyrannized his wife and child; and was "not content with having beaten his wife and daughter, he [even] smashed table lamp" (*The God* 39). Marriage for him was a means of the male's domination over woman and women were nothing but flowers in the hands of man. "Thanks to our wonderful Male chauvinistic society" Ammu had observed (57).

The second phase of Ammu's life was even more horrible and pathetic. Soon after marriage, Ammu discovered that her husband proved to be an alcoholic. He even went to the extent of asking her to satisfy the sexual desire of his boss, so his job could be saved. His extreme humiliation created a sense of great hatred in Ammu's heart for her husband. The woman has been the subject of great mystery and controversy in our history and traditions.

She is allegedly charged with many drawbacks mostly imaginary. A woman is always termed as one who loves ease and pleasure. She is empty-headed, narrow-minded, obstinate and vain. Most of the charges cited above are concocted. A woman is generally more emotional, sensitive with a greater power of endurance and patience when compared to a male.

Chacko who is a male member of the Ayemenem house was sent to study further. Ammu, on the other hand, was not allowed to study further. The reason stated was that she, being a woman, had no right to go to college. "She is a woman and, college studies corrupt a woman" (46). Even today, in spite of a fundamental improvement in woman's stature we see in the villages of India that the conservative and superstitious minds of a large number of people are against the higher education of girls. The novelist lashes out at the hypocritical moral code of society, which greatly differentiates between men and women. Things fall apart; women are depicted as 'outsiders', looking on from 'fringe' and not participating in administration of justice.

Arundhati Roy, in the line of Shashi Deshpande, delineates her women characters against a patriarchal structure. Like the seeker, in quest of an autonomy and freedom, different women characters in *The God of Small Things* are placed at different levels in their march towards emancipation. Like the 'new-woman' they are in search of their self-identity and liberation.

Another dominant theme in the story is caste-system and particularly the position of untouchables. As the story progresses, 'inferiority complex' is also traced in the interactions between untouchables and touchable in Ayemenem. Vellya is an example of an untouchable so grateful to the touchable class that he was willing to kill his son when he discovered that his son had broken the most important rule of class segregation. This throws light on the fact that the untouchables have also deeply internalized this class segregation. Here, Arundhati Roy points out those unnoticed shades of a social problem which generally escape the eyes of social scientists. Velutha's grandfather, Kelan, along with a number of other untouchables embraced Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability. Roy says, "It was little like having to sweep away your foot-prints without a broom or worse, not being allowed to leave the footprints at all" (74). Here, she points out that untouchables were not allowed to walk on the public roads. It is interesting to note that Roy's portrayal of the plight of the untouchables is very near to that of Mulk Raj Anand's famous novel *Untouchable*. Velutha is very close to Bakha in both his vision and vesture. In spite of all these great virtues, Velutha did not get proper respect in society.

The characterization of some of the 'untouchables' of this novel shows a very fine picture of the dalit and the deserted in society. The author seems to fling irony on the upper caste rich people of society who insult the untouchable without any meaning but to show their superiority.

The God of Small Things also deals with a radical theme of illicit relations. The sexual relation between Ammu and Velutha does not sound shocking to a westernized urban sensibility. However, a conventional mentality particularly in India is apt to be shocked by such things. Arundhati Roy, through the image of Ammu, points out that sex is a universal thing. Ammu's sexual thirst, the natural instinct of youth, was not properly slaked and so she was always seen haunted by sexual passion. The author writes, "Ammu grew tired of their proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body very much back" (222). *The God of Small Things* is thus abundantly saturated with the elements of sex and illicit relations.

Satire of politics is another prominent theme of this novel. Through the character of Comrade Pillai, the author satirises Marxism and the contemporary politics in Kerala. Pillai does not help Velutha in the police custody. Roy says that the word 'police' stands for loyalty and efficiency but the police Inspector, Thomas, lacks such qualities. He does not behave well with Ammu. He is an officer guided by politics and big guns of society.

However, the novel also examines the historical roots of these realities and develops profound insight into the ways in which human desperation and desire emerge from confines of a family entrenched cast society.

So, this novel makes a point to address various universal themes that range from biology to religion. The novel is extraordinary in its ability to address and comment on so many universally abstract themes as well as an array of ideas that regard the personal and the family history of each member of the Kochamma family along with even more broad concerns about the region of Kerala in India.

Overall, this novel is a breathtakingly imaginative view of a family who is nothing short of being unhappy and miserable in their own way. However, the most important and impressive feature of this novel is definitely its broad ranging

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