



INTRODUCTION

As soon as Arundhati Roy's novel The God of Small Things¹ won the Booker Award in 1997, it became a subject of controversy in the literary world. The study of this novel as a work of art in the Indian context is very significant. Therefore, it is proposed to attempt a full length critique and commentary of Roy's novel The God of Small Things for my M.Phil. dissertation.

The Indian novelists in English have recorded the Indian ethos in their novels. With the rise of Indian Nationalism symbolized by Mutiny of 1987. Since then, the thematics of the Indo-English novel has been changed considerably. Many writers turned to political themes, while other depicted social reality more typically through the medium of historical novels.

The Pre-Independence Indian novel in English, at the initial stage, was absolutely devoted to depict society and social reality. Besides, it has concentrated on cultural heritage, patriotism, nationalism and history of past India. The real break-through came in 1935 with the arrival of the big three viz. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. There is a considerable change in the subject matter, the manner of presentation and the Indian English idiom in their novels. They were followed by a second generation of novelists in 1950s. Outstanding among the male novelists are Bhabani Bhattacharya, G.V. Desani, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Arun Joshi, Raj Kamal Jha, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amit Chaudhari, Pankaj Mishra, Vikram Chandra, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rohinton Mistry, Allan Sealy and the like. Basing their themes in

India, these novelists have been able to handle both the plot and theme with great sensitivity and skill.

Women are natural story-tellers even when they don't write or publish. When Toru Dutt wrote two novels : Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden and Le Journal de Mademoisells d' Arvers , both of her novels became inevitably autobiographical projections.

Among other early novels by women writers may be mentioned: Sita Chatterjee's The Cage of Gold (1923), Nergis Dalal's Minari (1967), Raj Lakshmi Debi's The Hindu Wife or The Enchanted Fruit (1876) and Mrs. Ghosal was probably the first woman novelist in Bengali. Her two novels were translated into English as An Unfinished Song (1913) and The Fatal Garland. (1915).

A later writer Iqbalunnisa Hussain in her Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household (1944) has tried with commendable success to present the currents and cross currents in a typical Muslim family.

Most of the Indian women novelists started writing novels in English in the nineteen fifties. During this period Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Nayantara Sahgal provided a new insight into the status and attitude of women in society. Kamala Markandaya wrote Nectar in a Sieve (1954), Some Inner Fury (1957), A Silence of Desire (1961), Possession (1963), A Handful of Rice (1966), The Coffer Dams (1969), The Nowhere Man (1973), Two Virgins , The Honey Comb, and Pleasure City. The themes

of her novels are woman's position in Indian Society and the inner turmoil of a woman's heart.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala's literary output is : To Whom She Will (1955), The Nature of Passion (1956), Esmond in India (1958), The Householder (1960), Get Ready for Battle (1962), Heat and Dust (1975). These novels deal with the Indian Social problems within the typical family set-up.

Nayantara Sahgal's novels are A Time To Be Happy (1958), This Time of Morning (1965), Storm in Chandigarh (1965), The Day in Shadow (1971), A Situation in New Delhi, Rich Like Us, Plans for Departure, and Mistaken Identity. These novels reflect her interest and deep concern for Indian politics.

Anita Desai appeared on the Indian English literary landscape, with her novels Cry, The Peacock (1963), Voices in the City (1965), Bye-Bye Blackbird (1971), Where Shall We Go The Summer, Fire On The Mountain, Clear Light Of Day and In Custody. The themes of her novels are mostly related to women. Her women characters react very strongly and sensitively to the forces of our male dominated society.

Santha Rama Rau's novel Remember the House (1956), rings true because she writes of things well within the range of her experience. In Mrs. Muriel Wasi's novel Too High For Rivalry (1967), we come across the triumph of power through love. Jai Nimbkar appeared on the Indian literary scene with the publication of her novels Temporary Answers (1974), A Joint Venture and Come Rain.

Namita Gokhale's first work in mid-eighties, Paro: Dreams of Passion, is set in middle class cosmopolitan Indian life. She attempts a satire on the aspirations of women protagonists.

Manju Kapur in Difficult Daughters deals with women in a manner rare in Indian fiction. The female protagonist's dilemma, while expecting a child, on the backdrop of emotional poverty of her lover, is worth admiring.

Shashi Deshpande has emerged as one of the leading women novelists on the Indian literary horizon. She received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel That Long Silence in 1988. Her other novels are The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980), The Binding Vine, Roots and Shadows, If I Die Today and A Matter of Time (1996).

Shobha De's novels are Socialite Evenings (1988), Starry Nights (1990), Sisters, Strange Obsessions (1992), The Sultry Days, and Small Betrayals.

For Booker prize winner Arundhati Roy, the intensity of her writing came to light in her near classical The God of Small Things. This novel has been recognized as a moving tale characterized by excellence in artistry, social insight and poetic fervour. She is perhaps the first Indian woman novelist who has opened a big global market for Indian Writing in English. The novel became internationally popular among lovers of fiction. Arundhati Roy stretches the English language in all directions. The Booker Committee praised the novel certainly for its extraordinary linguistic inventiveness and the history of South India through the eyes of seven years Estha and Rahel.

It is seen in the plot, the story of cross-caste erotic love between a Paravan and a Syrian Christian. Furthermore, Roy depicts the complicated politics of Kerala with a rare insight.

The God of Small Things has a great deal of autobiographical details from the lives of Arundhati Roy and the other members of her family. The character of Ammu in the novel represents Mrs. Mary Roy, Arundhati Roy's mother. Ammu is a South Indian lady. She married a Bengali man with the surname Roy. As Ammu and her husband belong to two different states viz. Kerala and Bengal, there is very much cultural difference between them. It results into several problems. Their marital life is full of conflicts and Ammu is not happy at all. She was divorced by her husband. Then she is overburdened with the responsibility of bringing up two children. Ammu's struggle for her dear children's education and livelihood is painstaking. Ammu is portrayed as a tragic figure, a woman struggling against her motherhood and society.

The author grew up in Kerala, born to Syrian Christian mother and a Bengali father and lived at her uncle's pickle factory. At the age of eighteen she left home and went to Delhi to study architecture.

Arundhati Roy had written The God of Small Things over four years, sitting down in front of her Mackintosh regularly each morning and in secret she didn't even tell her husband that she dislikes re-writing. She says:

“Writing is a very instinctive thing for me.
I find as I write I get worse and worse.”²

The author reveals a child's vision of the adult world in her maiden novel. The child's point of view being the major one in the novel, Roy has the opportunity to realise a child's world with superb success. As Ranga Rao says:

“The children's high – voltage imagination results in linguistic stylistic exuberance, in the profusion of capitals inspired misspellings ----- repetitions, single sentence paras etc., in a comic strip – cartoon style.”³

Thus, in this novel, the narration is by the omniscient author with the point of view moving freely from character to character, which is a time – honoured fictional device.

The thirty-seven year old author's debut novel is trying to make the connections between the very smallest of things and the very biggest of things.

Jason Cowley says :

“The God of Small Things fulfills the highest demand of the art of fiction : to see the world, not conventionally or habitually, but as if for the first time.”⁴

This novel is somewhat an expression of the author's personality. It is a pale reflection of the haunts of Roy's own childhood on the limpid backwaters of Kerala and the society she lived with caste prejudices, discrimination against women. The author herself says:

“Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it. It is located very close to me – this book. It is located in the village that I grew-up. If I had to put it very simply, it is about trying to make the connections between the smallest of things and the biggest ones and to see how they fit together”⁵

The spread of the western culture in India through the media and commercialism is depicted in the novel. The story is about an Indian village but the sensibility is modern.

Her husband Pradip Krishen also has very high opinion about Arundhati's artistic talent. He believes that his Arundhati is a champion writer and she deserves the Booker Prize:

"Arundhati's book is playful not profound, it is not a learned book, yet a terrific book of memory."⁶

God obviously had bigger things in mind for Arundhati Roy. Her unique creation enabled her to win the commonwealth top fiction award, with her inner eye, extraordinary command of language and radical sensibility, she has portrayed ordinary things in an unusual way. Her courage and frankness in criticizing Kerala and the oppressive social fetters is extremely remarkable. Roy exclaims that she did not say that her book was the voice of the nation:

"It is my book, it's a story."⁷

In the history of Indo-Anglian literature, Arundhati Roy's name will be written in the letters of gold. She has created a new style of her own which is a blending of English with Indian idioms and this blending hypnotizes the reader, India or foreign. Her style is not pompous but a judicious mixture of lucidity and dignity. Future generations would also relish to drink deep at the fountain of the contents of The God of Small Things. Therefore it is proposed to study this novel in detail.

REFERENCES

1. Arundhati Roy, : The God of Small Things, New Delhi : IndiaInk, 1997. All quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text itself.
2. Quoted by Jaydipsing Dodiya and Indravadan Purohit, : “Autobiographical Elements in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”, Contemporary Indian writings in English, New Delhi : Atlantic publishers, 1998, P. 100.
3. Ranga Rao, : “Book(er) of the Year”, The Hindu, Sunday, November 23, 1997. P. 8.
4. Jason Cowley, : “Why We Chose Arundhati”, India Today, October 27, 1997, P. 28.
5. General Knowledge Today, November 1997, P.4
6. Quoted by Sagarika Ghose, : “English Chutneyfied”, Outlook October 27, 1997, P. 125.
7. “Holding on the Happiness”, First City, Delhi city Magazines, (602, Somvihar, New Delhi – 22) June, 1997, P. 21.