CHAPTER - I

THE THEME OF THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

The theme of a novel means its subject or its point of view the novelist wishes to propound. There are several themes expounded in The God of Small Things .Roy herself has said, it has been possible to single out certain topics. The theme of a novel is not its subject but rather its central idea which may be stated directly or indirectly. The novel evokes the child's world through the twins' experiences. The life of the weak and the helpless, suffering and exploitation, love laws, patriarchal oppression, history as an awful burden, social conventions and restrictions, family culture and pride, the struggle on the levels of society, state, family and personal relations, cruelty and malice, class antagonism, suppression of female sexuality, poverty, individual and social psychology, victims and victimizers, are the major themes of the novel . A century later the world still appears unprepared and uncomfortable to accept inter-caste sex which is one of Roy's themes in the novel. The novel revolves around a tight thematic unity, evident in those powerful sentences that appear at the end of the first chapter:

> "That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much". (P.33)

The new generation in Roy's novel transgresses the love laws particularly the ones against incest and the Indian canons on purity of widows and pollution of caste. The world they weave around themselves is according to Aijaz Ahmad: "a closed fatalistic world at the heart of individual choice deaths far-told on the obverse of phallic ecstasy".[1]

The theme of the novel is symbolically expressed in the title, The God of Small Things . The symbolic formulation of the theme is revealed by the author at many places in the novel. We may begin by quoting her own clarification of the title:

> To me the god of small things is the inversion of God. God's a big thing and God's in control. The god of small things --- whether it's the way the children see things or whether it's the insect life in the book, or the fish or the stars- there is not accepting of what we think of as adult boundaries. This small activity that goes on is the under life of the book. All sorts of boundaries are transgressed upon. At the end of the first chapter I say little events and ordinary things are just smashed and reconstituted, imbued with the meaning to become the bleached bones of the story. It's a story that examines things very closely but also form a very, very distant point, almost from geological time and you look at it and see a pattern there. A pattern --- of how in these small events and in these small lives the world intrudes. And because of this, because of people living unprotected --- the world and the social machine intrudes into the smallest, deepest core of their being and changes their life.[2]

So, The God of Small Things stands for the life of the weak and the helpless. Whether they are small creatures like blue bottles, frogs and ants or human beings such as the women who supply Chacko's 'man's needs' or children like Estha and Rahel. Contrasted with The God of Big Things, The God of Small Things accounts for the life and sufferings. The God of Small Things represents all those people who are victimized by the forces of history, dead conventions, false pride and respectability, the tyranny of the state and the politics of opportunism and order. The God of Small Things is also the simple, natural life of children and innocent creatures.The first clear allusion of the theme occurs in the first chapter, 'Paradise Pickles & Preserves'. There is a comment on the strange look that Rahel's eyes wore when Larry McCaslin

made love to her. The whole experience of rejection and loss of relations lies behind that look:

> "That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he become resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing mattered much". (P.19).

The Small God rules the destiny of those who are doomed to assume the role of transgressors because they are guided by nature and not by convention. The arbitrary rules are like the banana jam illegally produced by 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves'. Rahel rightly thought that this unclassifiable product had a symbolic application to her family. The trouble began with the coming of Sophie Mol to Ayemenem. Truly speaking:

> "That it really began in the days when the Love Law were made." (P.33)

The novel also accounts Pappachi's cruelty against Mammachi and Ammu and it is to be regarded as reprehensible; on the other, it is held responsible for the bouts of temper in Ammu which constitute a rebellion against patriarchal oppression and social tyranny.

Arundhati Roy conceives history as an awful burden. History is immutable. History has its own cruel ways of dealing with those who do not fit into this pattern and who do not conduct themselves according to its ruthless requirements. It is a tragic fate of the twins' life that at a tender age:

> "Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws. They heard its sickening thud. They swelled its smell and never forget it. " (P.55)

Then we find at the middle of the novel, a short chapter No.11, entitled 'The God of Small Things'. It deals with Ammu's dream which can be interpreted as her vision of the God of Small Things. She visualized her children's faces hanging over her dream, like two dark, worried moons, waiting to be let in.

Ammu challenges the defiled social order and what it represents first, by marrying a man of her choice and then breaking that marriage and getting entangled in a forbidden love. This forbidden, platonic love, as personified in the novel is like a person with serious handicaps:

> "If he held her, he couldn't kiss her. If he kissed her, he couldn't feel her." (P.215)

Ammu seeks to unsettle the formidable structures of an irrelevant socio-cultural order by interrogating the traditional grammar of love. It is followed by the omniscient narrator's questions:

> "Who was he, the one-armed man? Who could he have been? The God of Loss? The God of Small Things? The God of Goose Bumps and Sudden Smiles ? Of Sourmetal Smells like steel bus-rails and the smell of the bus conductor's hand from holding them? ". (P.217)

Then there is the untouchable Velutha who loves Ammu. It is also indirectly related to the God of Small Things and the God of Loss. The God of Small Things is about the violence inherent in traditional, modern Indian and Western hierarchies and institutions that have got together to deny the freedom and dignity of the "Small things" in order to maintain themselves. In the chapter twenty 'The Madras Mail', this theme is restated. And it is indicated that Ammu's whole body feels an irresistible hunger for this day:

> "As she leaned against the door in the darkness, she felt her dream, her afternoon-mare move inside her like a rib of water rising from the ocean, gathering into a wave. The cheerful one-armed man with salty skin and a shoulder that ended abruptly like a cliff emerged from the shadows of the jagged beach and walked towards her.
>
> Who was he?
> Who could he have been?
> The God of loss.
> The God of Small Things.
> The God of Goose Bumps and sudden smiles.
> He could do only one thing at a time. (P. 330)

Then Ammu and Velutha are completely under the spell of the God of Small Tings. The God of Big Things is recklessly forgotten.

Therefore the upper world consists of the burden of history, dead limbs of tradition, family culture and pride, patriarchy and political opportunism- The God of Big Things. Other world comprises children, insecure women, untouchable and working class people with their struggle for identity and independence and natural desire- The God of Small Things.

The small people are sought out and destroyed. They have no choice and no chance of succeeding against the formidable forces operating on them. The novel includes a study of a feudal Syrian Christian family being eaten up by the elements of decay.

The theme of exploitation and sufferings in the novel, presents three generations of women. It can be called the story of sufferings of Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel. All of them suffer in different ways. And the patriarchal system is very strong in India, so women suffer mentally, physically and sexually.

The maltreatment that Ammu necessarily has had a bad effect upon her childern's life. Ammu's father used to beat her mother with a brass vase. Once he turned the mother and daughter out of the house. She was deprived of higher education because Pappachi thought that college education was an unnecessary expense for the sake of a girl. In order to minimize her sense of insecurity, she drifted into a loveless marriage. Her Bengali husband was an Assistant Manager on a tea estate in Assam. His family was once wealthy zamindars who has been migrated to Calcutta from East Bengal after partition. Ammu just weighed the odds. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply. Soon after she knew her husband was an alcoholic who went to the extent of asking her to satisfy the lust of his boss, Mr. Hollick, so that his job could be saved. Then Ammu's struggle began. And she left the house.

At first married to a non-Syrian Christian and then a divorcee, without welcome, Ammu returned to Ayemenem. When she saw the condition of her two children in her parent's house, Ammu was filled with extreme pity. Things reached to a top when Ammu loves the untouchable Velutha whereas Ammu's affair is treated with extreme tension. Chacko's man's needs are not only tolerated but also accommodated by the family. The tragedy gives Baby Kochamma an opportunity to torture them. Ammu has great courage so she goes to the Police Inspector, Thomas Mathew who insults her calling 'Veshya' and calling her children as 'illegitimate'. In this way Ammu and her children

suffer a lot in their life. After some days, Estha is sent back to his father. Ammu is asked to leave the house. Her death in ignonimity and disgraceful cremation bring the story of her life to an end.

The twins – Estha and Rahel stand condemned in their birth. They are the product of an inter-caste marriage. They are treated by the family as outsiders. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem, the inevitable circumstances make her became an eye-witness to the diseased condition of her dying mother. After Ammu's death Rahel drifts aimlessly. The convent tradition blindly refuses the very existence of female sexuality:

> "In that Christian institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist, and if they didn't could they hurt?" (P.16)

However, the neglect which Rahel suffers at home and in school, produces contrary results. In each of the schools, the teachers noted that she was an extremely polite child. And she had no friends. It gives rise to a defiant mood in her mind. It encourages her to act on her own independently:

> "Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a Sitting Down sense. She returned with him to Boston." (P.18)

Rahel suffers at home and in school. But the suffering has given her a superior outlook and an attitude of detachment. Like her mother, she contracts a loveless marriage simply for gaining some kind of foothold. Then they were divorced. So when she hears that Estha has been sent back to Ayemenem, she gives up her job and returns to Ayemenem.

Symbolically Velutha is associated with the God of Small Things. He is an embodiment of extreme social discrimination, humiliation and poverty. Ammu as a girl had developed a soft corner for him, but the awakening of love occurs years later when she watches him as a young man. The Ayemenem leader Comrade Pillai does not approve of the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. Even the Police cannot tolerate this inter-caste affair. In this way the forces of history, politics and state make a combined effort to destroy Velutha. And the small man in his small acts gets no chance of survival and he dies at last.

The caste system in India was so strong that the lower-caste people were not allowed to enter the houses of upper-caste people. Kochamma told Rahel's grandmother, Mammachi:

> "How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?" (P.78)

In The God of Small Things one finds another theme of hunger for love and sense of alienation. The characters in the novel suffer from humiliation and exploitation by the elders, parents and society. In spite of the symbolic nature of the novel, there is also a desire to present the social reality and the method of social realism is certainly used in the novel.

The God of Small Things is about the violence inherent in traditional and modern Indian and Western hierarchies and institutions that have got together to deny the freedom and dignity of the "Small things" in order to maintain themselves. It 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. According to Ranga Rao:

> "Roy's book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, Small Things : Children and youth, women and untouchables."[3]

Several years later Rahel returns to the house because her twin brother Estha is re-returned. She relieves mentally of the events of her childhood. Various happenings-historical social and political-have mixed together to create a tragedy. But according to Roy, the most responsible factor is our social code of conduct. The victimization of the weak has been commonplace in human history. All patriarchal societies see woman as a sub-ordinate being or the 'other'. However, caste and class differences create hierarchies among women.

In The God of Small Things, Pappachi is a 'patriarch' who ill-treats his wife Mammachi. She bears his beating and abuse in silence. Compared to Mammachi, Baby Kochamma's suffering is less. Baby Kochamma, her sister in law, who is unmarried, has faced no brutality since she is unmarried and belongs to an upper class reputed family. Her only dissatisfaction in life is her unfulfilled love for Father Mulligam. She takes sadistic pleasures in destroying the smallest joys of Ammu and her twins.

The problem of race is an added thematic dimension. Fair skin, blue eyes and red-gold hair signify perfect beauty and superiority. Chacko's ex-wife Margaret Kochamma and her daughter Sophie Mol outshine the members

of the Ayemenem house. Ammu and her dark-skinned twins are made to feel inferior and out of place in the perfect family gathering.

In our patriarchal society, gender plays a very important role in discriminating the powerful and the powerless. Though Mammachi belongs to the upper class, she has no right whatsoever in her husband's family.

The communist movement was supposed to aim at a classless society. In spite of theoretical emphasis of communism on equality and social justice, the institution of the party in Ayemenem functions from within the caste system. This institution like Christianity, is concerned with maintaining its own existence. Comrade Pillai lies to Inspector Mathew about Velutha's not being a card-holder. The policemen and politicians make sure that no transgressor of rules is spared.

The Big Things unite whenever there is a threat from Small Things. The Small Things- Ammu, Estha, Rahel and Velutha, who aspire for mutual warmth and genuine love are destroyed. They do not leave behind any memory of pain or concern in the minds of the survivors. Their every mark is swept away.

The theme of The God of Small Things is the whole process of worse civilization. The chief element of the civilizing process is love, and all civilization is based on repression.

Roy writes with enthusiasm about the styles of dressing by various characters. Sophie Mol lay in her coffin:

> " She lay in it in her yellow Crimplene bellbottoms with her hair in a ribbon and her Made – in England go-go bag that she loved". (P.4)

Similarly, Rahel and Estha are often described in terms of their dress and hair style:

> "Most of Rahel's hair sat on top of her head like a fountain. It was held together by a Love-in Tokyo-two heads on a rubber band, nothing to do with Love or Tokyo. In Kerala Love-in-Tokyos have withstood the test of time, and even today if you were to ask for one at any respectable A-1 Ladies' Store, that's what you'd get. Two beads on a rubber band". (P.37)

Estha is often seen wearing his beige and pointy shoes and his Elvis puff. Mundu is a common article of dress in Kerala worn by lower and upper classes alike. Both Mammachi and Baby Kochamma wear saris but:

> "Kochu Maria still wore her spotless half-sleeved white chatta with a V-neck and her white mundu, which folded into a crisp cloth fan on her behind". (P.170)

One interesting feature of realism is the presentation of the typical scenes in private or public places. The author presents a vivid picture of the church and performing of a funeral ceremony according to the customs of Syrian Christian:

> "The priests with curly beards swung pots of frankincense on chains and never smiled at babies the way they did on usual Sundays". (P.4)

The day Chacko's daughter arrives, there is a special function in the family for her welcome. Everyone wears a special dress. In chapter 12, there is a description of the temple elephant and the custom of presenting stories from the Indian epics in Kathakali.

The treatment meted out to the untouchables is a major concern of the novel. It is in the fitness of things and thematically relevant that the author supplies us historical information in sociological terms means the social condition of the untouchables in the past. Roy provides us useful historical knowledge in terms of human relations. After British came to Malabar, a number of low caste people became Christians and joined the Anglican Church in the hope of being freed from the curse of untouchability. But they soon realized that this did not improve their social position. They were still discriminated against by being given separate churches, services, priests and pariah Bishop.

It is in this historical context that we have to view Vellya Paapen's worries as regards Velutha's conduct. Vellya Paapen was an Old World Paravan and he naturally felt that any attempt at social equality on the part of an untouchable would be met with most severe punishment.

The advent of Satellite T.V. is shown to have produced considerable impact even on the life styles of the other generation. It became the new love of Baby Kochamma who was now able to get glimpses of modern life:

> "It wasn't something that happened gradually. It happened overnight. Blondes, wars, famines, football, sex, music, coups d'e'tat- they all arrived on the same train".(P.27)

Arundhati Roy projects class antagonism and class exploitation in terms of caste, and she cleverly makes contrast between Touchables and Untouchables. When Velutha is discovered to be carrying on sexual relations with Ammu, all the representatives of the ruling class and its allies form a

solid front- the police, the communist leader, the feudal minded elders of the family-all unite in acts of extreme savagery.

We come across the behaviour and words of the Orangedrink Lemondrink man, we find that he is jealous of Estha and he has bitterness against the feudal and rich people. He asks Estha to :

> "Think of all the poor people who have nothing to eat or drink". (PP.104-105)

The novel presents a study of individual and social psychology also. Ammu's outbursts of vulgarity were astonishing and a short psychological observation is added:

> "Because Ammu had not had the kind of education, nor read the sorts of books, nor met the sorts of people, that might have influenced her to think the way she did. She was just that sort of animal".(P.180)

Similarly, Rahel is reported to have received inadequate socialization:

> "Rahel grew up without a brief". (P.17)

In addition to Estha is stuck silent as a consequence of the sense of guilt.

The spread of the Western culture in India via the media and commercialism is depicted in the novel. The world has become a very small place. Popular culture in the form of magazines, television etc. has made it possible for every person to have the West in his or her home and it is responsible for the rapid spread of Western culture.

'Marxism', a Western ideology is accepted in Kerala. But Marxism as political ideology is accepted only when it is able to create a different kind of power structure. Politicians like Comrade Pillai, although they have adopted

the Marxist ideology are professional people who will destroy the expendable in order to maintain power.

The God of Small Things is a remarkable indictment of patriarchy and the injustice and oppression faced by woman. In the male-dominated society, woman is victimized everywhere: as a daughter in her parents' house, as a wife in her husband's house, as a worker in a factory or as an employee in an office. The novel brings into limelight the women's desire for self-respect and liberation from all social taboos and it is presented through Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi etc.

Roy creates wonderful picture of Nature and habits. The novel is an exotic portrayal of the colourful Nature that inhabits the inhuman and cruel human beings who are victims of their own attitudes and beliefs. In other words, Roy highlights the paradox between wonderful beauty of Nature and disgraceful human behaviour and it shows her humanistic concern like Mulk Raj Anand. And Donald Eichert comments on the theme of the novel:

> "Her rustic idyll set in her childhood Kerala caught the publishers and then the worldwide readership's imagination with a bold formula and an age-old theme, told endearingly through the stream of consciousness of a small girl ". [4]

In fact, the book deals with both things. The novel deals with our ability to be brutal as well as our ability to be so " deeply intimate and deeply loving".[5]

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