



CHAPTER - II

THE STRUCTURE OF THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Arundhati Roy composed her novel The God of Small Things in 21 chapters. In an interview, she says:

For me the structure of my story, the way it reveals itself was so important, my language is mine, it's the way I think and the way I write.....¹

In the novel right at the middle, chapter eleventh is entitled 'The God of Small Things'. Roy has very skillfully given this title to her novel. And she herself admits:

“I think that one of the most important things about the structure is that in some way the structure of the book ambushes the story. You know it tells a different story from the story the book is telling”.²

The novelist has recreated a micro world in The God of Small Things with Ayemenem town in Kerala as its centre. The life in Ayemenem runs smoothly with all its ups and downs; twists and turns like water of the Meenachal river. The novel starts with the description of Ayemenem in Kerala:

“May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air --- (P.1)”

There is a kind of camera eye capturing the natural scene of Ayemenem in the months of May and June:

“ It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem.” (P.1)

The God of Small Things is an autobiographical novel based on the early life of the novelist. The novel is set in the Kottayam district of Kerala. It is a story of Mary Roy, a divorced lady, and her little twins – Rahel and Estha. Rahel observes and depicts the complicated personal life of her mother on the background of the equally complex political situation in the state.

The central story of the novel presents through four generations :viz.;

- first- E.John Ipe, Aleyooty Ammachi,
- secondly- Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma,
- thirdly- Chacko, Margaret, Ammu, Velutha, and
- lastly - Sophie mol, Estha, Rahel etc.

But the basic story is the love story of Ammu and Velutha. Sangeeta Chopra comments:

“The God of Small Things neither claims to tell the real story of the author’s life nor does it try to explain the psyche of a genius”.³

In the novel, Ammu had witnessed the varieties of patriarchal power. She had two young children and no more dreams:

“To Ammu her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other’s company, lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic”.(P.43)

At first, married to a non-Syrian Christian and then a divorcee, she was held in double contempt by the members of her family, like Baby Kochamma, whose frustration in love had rendered her wicked. When Ammu saw the condition of her two children in her parents’ house, she was filled with pity. Ammu and her children had not ethnical, social or financial support in the

Ayemenem family. Things go to the highest point when Ammu and the untouchable Velutha's affair is discovered. And the drowning of Sophie Mol is falsely associated with Ammu's affair. This also presents the different attitudes towards the sexual desires of men and women.

Ammu's brother, Chacko would be the head of the family in this powerful, patriarchal structure. Now, Mammachi, Ammu and Chacko, all three worked in the factory but Ammu never had claim on the property as she was the daughter and Chacko too always referred to as:

“ My factory, my pineapples, my pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property”.(P.57)

To which Ammu reacted in a very cynical manner, Ammu said:

“Thank to our wonderful male Chauvinist society”. (P.57)

Then Chacko said:

“What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine”. (P.57)

When Chacko marries a Roman Catholic, Margaret Kochamma, he is very happy and lives in bliss till Margaret realizes that she will have to leave Chacko. And Chacko comes back to Ayemenem with his Bharat bottle sealing machine, his Balliol oar and his broken heart. But unlike Ammu:

“ Mammachi joyfully welcomed him back into her life. She fed him, she sewed for him, she saw to it that there were fresh floweres in his room everyday. Chacko needed his mother's adoration. Indeed, he demanded it, yet he despised her for it and punished her in secret ways”.(P.248)

This treatment was quite a contrast compared to Ammu's who silently comes into the house. The church never points a finger at him when he begins

to satisfy 'men's needs' for those women too are of lower caste with whom he sleeps. When Baby Kochamma brought up the subject, Mammachi became tense and tight-lipped.

Patriarchy functions best and works on women, children and the powerless. To begin with the family tree, E. John Ipe had two children, Baby Kochamma and Pappachi. Baby Kochamma decides to remain unmarried, remaining faithful to her love for Father Mulligan and Pappachi marries Mammachi. Pappachi was an extremely jealous husband. And he couldn't tolerate the success of his wife, be it with the violin or the pickle factory. He used to beat his wife regularly. When Ammu grew up, she became a witness and also a target of beatings. Ammu learnt to live with this cold calculating cruelty. Ammu was not even sent to school for further studies as she was a girl child, and Chacko went upto Oxford for his studies.

Ammu and her twins, considered to be half Hindu now, are supposed to be outcastes. Margaret and her daughter Sophie Mol are preferred to Ammu and her twins. Estha and Rahel belonged to the innocent world of children who have pure hearts. Their love is so selfless and pure which irritates even Ammu sometimes:

“ Their willingness to love people who didn't really love them, exasperated her and sometimes made her want to hurt them-just as an education- a protection”.(P.43)

The twins were despised by everybody; Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria and Chacko. Baby Kochamma never escaped the chance to hurt them. And because of Sophie Mol's arrival they were ignored. The

Orangedrink Lemondrink Man exploits Estha by forcing him to hold his private part and shatters the innocent world of a child. That shameful and terrific experience haunts the boy again and again:

“The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man could walk in any minute. Catch a Cochin-Kottayam bus and be there.”(P.194)

This fellow was more powerful than Estha and hence uses his power due to which the child feels sick. Rahel is the only one who feels sad for Estha, for his illness. Estha and Rahel too are outcastes in their family and hence the binding is even stronger. They were powerless and vulnerable:

“A pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. Stumbling through their parts, nursing someone else’s sorrow. Grieving someone else’s grief”. (P. 191)

Ammu leaves Rahel behind with Mammachi and Chacko. Ammu and her twins suffer at the hand of these powerful people. Everyone neglected Rahel. She drifted from one school to another school. Mammachi and Chacko just provided her with food and shelter, but nothing beyond that:

“She spent her holidays in Ayemenem, largely ignored by Chacko and Mammachi.” (P. 15)

The separation of Rahel and Estha seriously affected Estha’s behaviour. He became very quiet almost dumb. He finished his school and didn’t go to college.

It is observed that in the first chapter ‘Paradise Pickles & Preserves’, the novelist introduces Velutha. Rahel imagines:

“Someone like Velutha, bare bodied and shining, sitting on a plank, swinging from the scaffolding in the high dome of the church, painting silver jets in a blue church sky.” (P.6)

Velutha, the untouchable boy had been in the habit of going to the Ayemenem House with his father, Vellya Paapen, to deliver coconuts plucked from the trees in the compound. These Paravans were never allowed to enter the house. In fact, Velutha's grandfather Kelan along with a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas has embraced Christianity. Though they were converted to Christianity to escape from the untouchability, they were still treated as untouchables.

One finds, Velutha has grown dangerously. As a rebel, even Vellya Paapen feared for him:

“At least not until the Terror took hold of him. Not until he saw, night after night, a little boat being rowed across the river. Not until he saw it return at dawn. Not until he saw what his Untouchable son had touched. More than touched. Entered. Loved.” (P.78)

Arundhati Roy gives a meaningful description of how Ammu gets sexually attracted to her lover Velutha:

“In the dappled sunlight filtering through the dark green trees, Ammu watched Velutha lift her daughter effortlessly as though she was an inflatable child, made of air. As he tossed her up and she landed in his arms, Ammu saw on Rahel's face the high delight of the airborne young.” (P.175)

After the funeral of Sophie Mol, Ammu took her twins to Kottayam Police Station. There we see her asking for Velutha. Later they went back to Ayemenem by bus. Rahel could smell the sheaf of bus tickets and the sourness of the steel bus-rails on the conductor's hands:

‘He's dead’, Ammu whispered to him, ‘I've killed him’. (P.8)

The first thing that Inspector Thomas Mathew did was to send a jeep to fetch the local communist leader comrade K. N. M. Pillai. They did not see eye to eye and never trusted each other. Pillai deliberately concealed the fact that Velutha was a member of the party. He also did not reveal that Velutha had been to his house the previous night. Velutha was declared to have no patronage or protection of the party. Another important thing is that Pillai dislikes the affair of Ammu as a upper class girl and Velutha as untouchable boy.

The police are the servants of the state. They went to Velutha's house and woke him up with their boots:

"They heard the thud of wood on flesh. Boot on bone. On teeth. The muffled grunt when a stomach is kicked in. The muted crunch of skull on cement. The gurgle of blood on a man's breath when his lung is torn by the jagged end of a broken rib." (P.308)

One of them even flicked at his penis with his stick and remarked:

"Come on show us your special secret. Show us how big it gets. When you below it up." (P. 311)

As the children came handy, they were asked to depose before the police, saying that they were abducted by the Paravan:

"If you want to save her, all you have to do, is to go with the Uncle with the big meeshas. He'll ask you a question. One question. All you have to do to say 'Yes'. Then we can all go home. It's so easy. It's a small prince to pay." (P.318)

Meanwhile Velutha's body was dumped that marked the end of the life of an untouchable.

Ammu became sick but continued visiting Rahel. Mammachi used her power and told her not to visit Rahel in such a condition and Ammu never

visited them again. Ammu died alone in a lodge in Alleppey. The church, too, refused her a burial, so she was taken to a crematorium. We come across the reference to Ammu's death in the first chapter:

“Thirty-one
Not old
Not young
But a viable-dieable age” (P.3)

When Estha and Rahel are reunited, they reached the age of thirty-one.

No surprise that after Ammu's death Rahel drifts aimlessly. The convent tradition blindly refuses the very existence of female sexuality. However, the neglect which Rahel suffers at home and in school produces contrary results. It encourages her to act on her own independently. Like her mother, she contrasts a loveless marriage simply for the purpose of gaining some kind of foothold. Her marriage is not successful. She left her husband Larry McCaslin. She gives up her job in America and returns to Ayemenem. She has only one support and love i.e. Estha.

Though the novel has no plot or sub-plot in a strict sense of the term, the story of Chacko and Margaret Kochamma's married life figures somehow as a sub-plot in the novel. Chacko is only Sophie Mol's "biological father". Joe, an English man, whom Margaret Kochamma remarried was her real father. Like Ammu, Chacko's marriage too is an utter failure because of cultural contrasts and different national identities. The loss of Sophie Mol is a loss of everything in their life.

Apart from this, the novel very poetically and imaginatively, depicts the story of the twins, Estha and Rahel for whom Ammu is both father and mother.

Roy achieves superb success in depicting the children's world. They experience the joy and purity childhood in just one scene; when they visit Velutha's cottage and can see the Christ in him. But these innocent children lose their only God and an affectionate friend with the death of Velutha.

The God of Small Things is constructed in a zigzag manner. The time allotted to the book is barely two weeks but the story covers thirty-one years. The events within two weeks have done so much to shape and mould the lives of two egg twins aged six at the time of happening. We meet them after twenty-three years in the opening chapter when Rahel has come to Ayemenem to visit her brother Estha. Estha and Rahel thought themselves together as me and separately individually as 'we' or 'us', but now as 'them' and 'they'. It shows the time-gap. They are now thirty-one years old. The important events of the story are few and easy to record. The whole book mainly moves round the tale of two children-Rahel and Estha, Estha just eighteen minutes older to his sister. As Estha stirred the thick jam, he thought about two things:

- a) Anything can happen to Anyone
So
- b) It's Best to be prepared. (P.267)

Estha wears narrow black trousers and pointed shoes. He has an Elvis Presley puff. His favourite song is "party". The twins have seen the film 'Sound of Music', three times and know all the songs by heart. Their mother reads them The Jungle book, at bedtime and at the age of seven they have read, Shakespeare in the abridged version.

The Indian vs. the English dilemma is described in the novel. The novel is structurally very complex. It is full of flash-backs and flash-forwards. It is creating a kind of maze, now revealing now concealing. The events in the novel, are intricately woven around a central incident of Sophie Mol's death.

Alok Rai describes Roy's effort in the following words:

"I think of it as a sort of spiral structure, a brooding around a central event whose essential contours are made known fairly early in the novel. But at each turn of the spiral, one had been to a few more places, known other feelings and persons and is, therefore, enmeshed in an ever-denser cross-referentially, is able and required to endow that central event with more content more response, more poignancy."⁴

The structure of the novel is like a maze in which the reader gets more and more engrossed until she solves the puzzle, which is possible only at the end of the story. Arundhati Roy seems to have taken lot of pains to create such a complex structure. In an interview, she admits:

"The architecture of my book-now that is something I consciously crafted... To play with Time... little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of the story."⁵

Roy's maiden novel is an experience and experiment of a unique kind.

Roy herself has said:

"The God of Small Things is such as intricately structured book that I feel the only person who understands its balancing in its entirety-that if you take this out, something will crash there-is me."⁶

She further clarified that she designed her book with the skill of an architect:

"I still practice architecture. Constructing my book was actually an architectural things."⁷

The whole story of the novel is displayed in the first chapter in a nutshell. In an interview Roy stated that the entire thing is placed before the reader in the beginning:

“In the first chapter I more or less tell you the story, but the novel ends in the middle of the story, and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word ‘tomorrow’.”⁸

The opening of the novel breaks all the conventional rules of the novel writing as given by E. M. Forster in his book Aspects of the Novel. The novel begins with the end. While commenting on the structure of the novel, Sumana Mukherjee remarks:

“Roy’s architectural training becomes apparent as the book progresses; it is constructed not in straight linear chronological form but goes in and out backward and forward in space and in time.”⁹

Though the novel seems provincial and whole-heartedly Indian at a metaphorical level, it is about the eternal sufferings of women and untouchables who are still secondary citizens in the Independent India. In this way the novel is provincial and universal at the same time.

The children’s point of view being the major one in the novel, Roy has the opportunity to realize a child’s world, with superb success. The narration is by the omniscient author with the point of view moving freely from character to character. It is a time-honoured fictional device. Arundhati Roy has used post-modern narrative techniques to weave the saga of a family of four generations.

As for the other important aspects of the narrative technique, Roy employs a double time scheme in narrating the story. A major part of the

action has to do with the post-momentous and tragic of the Ayemenem household.

Roy employs an indirect narrative and there is no chronological sequence in the events of the novel. There are time shifts. The narration suddenly moves forward and backward. It enhances the effect of the narration making the novel post-modern. It is essential to understand the variations in the narrative to grasp the point of view and the tone of the novel. And it is a challenging task in the critical circle. Many scholars have expressed different opinions about the structure of the novel. All of them assume that The God of Small Things has a design and a purpose. It seeks to spell out the tragedy of individuals caused by victimization by caste, class, gender, history and social conventions.

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