

A POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* BY ARUNDHATI ROY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the cultural and social implications which exist in *The God of Small Things* written by Indian postcolonial writer Arundhati Roy. The study analyzes Roy's work according to the postcolonial theory and gives importance to the premises of main theorist in this field. Postcolonial literary texts like Roy's are rewritings of colonial and postcolonial images. Roy's protagonists Rahel and Estha grow up in a village in Kerala influenced with Elvis Presley, Broadway musicals, peppermint candies, Love-in-Tokyo hair bands, Rhodes scholarships, Chinese Marxism, and Syrian Christianity. Most of these cultural images are foreign, yet all of these are their own. Thus, while in one sense these children, as Roy's hybrid characters, are Malayalam, in another sense they are not. This turmoil of identification forms the basis of the plot, the children aren't certain who or what they are.

Key Words: Postcolonial Literature, cultural and social implications, colonial and postcolonial images, hybrid identities.

The history of colonialism began in the 15th century with the age of discovery, led by Spanish and Portuguese explorations of Americas and other continents, but, in the eighteenth century Europe, the advent of the Industrial Revolution led to great changes in the industrial transformation of economies and an enormous development in the traditional trade. European countries in order to provide themselves with raw materials and markets for their goods colonized many non-European countries. Europeans on behalf of colonialism making their way to non-European countries came in contact with the non-European landscape and nation. Identifying with Eurocentrism let them to observe themselves as superior and the colonized and their land as inferior and uncivilized. Consequently,

they tried to transform the colonized landscape into the civilized countries similar to home country. In spite of this fact that European regarded themselves superior to the non-European countries in all aspects, and aimed at turning this inferior land into civilized one, the deep understanding and close interaction always resulted in a deep fear for the colonizers.

The colonizers preoccupied by the possibility of being contaminated on account of deep interaction with these uncivilized people were always afraid of this interaction, thereby leaving behind their purity and superiority over the colonized, as a result, the colonizer always regarded the interaction with the colonized as a threat and they camouflaged their fear every time. The deep interaction between the colonizer and the colonized despite being a menace to the colonizer had another impact on the colonized which resulted in losing self respect and devaluing image of themselves among this people. Thus, the oppressed people, uprooted from their own selves, struggled to become a member of another culture.

During the colonial period written text favored the Europeans and their superiority over the non-Europeans. It was the system of power that determines the representations. Terry Goldie maintains that “the indigene is a semiotic pawn on a chess board under the control of the white signmaker” (Goldie 1995: 232). Thus, in oriental discourse the Europeans were portrayed as “masculine”, “democrat”, “rational”, “moral”, “dynamic”, and “progressive”. Otherwise, since the writing was under the direct control of the Europeans the non-Europeans were described as “voiceless”, “sensual”, “female”, “despotic”, “irrational”, and “backward”. Colonial discourse never depicted the anxiety and the suffering of the colonial stemmed from the underestimated image of themselves. Throughout the colonial period and the aftermath, the west had cultural and economic hegemony over the non-Europeans through orientalist discourse. According to Bill Ashcroft the colonizers who believed themselves as “a high level of civilization”, fabricated the colonized lands in colonial discourse as “civilizations in decay, as manifestations of degenerate societies and races in need of rescue and rehabilitations by a civilized Europe” (Ashcraft, 1998: 158). Upon settling down, therefore, the colonizers desired to bring the best of their country to the colonized territory, and to change this native country to a civilized one. Colonial discourse fabricating the native cultures as both primitive and degenerate was because fearing of contamination amongst the colonizers. Bill Ashcraft highlights that “expressed through a fear amongst the colonizers of going native, namely losing their distinctiveness

and superiority of contamination from native practices” (Ashcroft 1998: 159).

Consequently, despite the fact that the colonizer had gone to the colonized land to change things; they themselves, however, were at the risk of being changed by the colonized. The deep interaction with the native people and under the effects of climate of the colonies in hot areas, the colonizer degenerated both morally and physically, and slipped as Ashcroft claims, “from European behavior, to the participation in native ceremonies, or the adoption and even enjoyment of local customs in terms of dress, food, recreation and entertainment” (Ashcroft, 1998: 115). In fact, the colonized encountered and experienced what they always feared; that is they were debased and contaminated by the native life and customs, and they uprooted. Upon the arrival in the colonized land, the colonizer acknowledged the difficulty of surviving in that land. On the whole, these are some of the themes the postcolonial discourse aims at discussing and exploring.

However, the colonized people after obtaining their dependency, who acknowledged the importance of their identity and who learned not to be embarrassed about their culture and past, started to create their own text called postcolonial literature. Then, postcolonial text began to abolish the Eurocentric assumptions created by the Europeans, although the colonized had not the privilege to break the European domination and to portray the Europeans the same way they were illustrated through the colonial period. To put it more precisely, they have had the opportunity to present Europeans as “immoral”, “irrational”, and “sensual”, just as they were pictured during the colonial period. Moreover, the colonized, having been neglected for a long time, and tolerating the suffering for decades, upon starting to write the text began to imitate the colonizer.

On the whole, all these cultural and social implications mentioned above encompass the main themes of the postcolonial novels. This study examines the Indian Arundhati Roy’s postcolonial novel *The God of Small Things* which presents and reflects the issues of the postcolonial period. Arundhati Roy was born, grew up and educated in India. Roy in her celebrated novel *The God of Small Things* tells the story of a Syrian Christian family in southern province of Kerala, India. The main plot is constructed around this family; retired imperial entomologist Pappachi Kochamma is the father of the family. Upon retiring from his job in Delhi he returns back to his hometown Ayemenem with his wife, Mammachi Kochamma, and his

two children Ammu and Chacko. Ammu their daughter several years after their arrival experience an unhappy marriage with a Hindu man, which end in divorce. Ammu after divorce comes back to her parental house with her twin, Estha and Rahel. Ammu and her twin begin to live in Ayemenem with Mammachi, Chacko, and their aunt, Aunt Baby. Chacko Pappachi, family's son is sent to Oxford to continue his education, where he meets his future English wife Margaret but their marriage ends in divorce in the same year, then, Chacko leaving Margaret and his daughter Sophie Mol, in England, comes back to Ayemenem to his father's home.

Roy's story revolves around the events surrounding the visit made by Sophie Mol Chacko's daughter and his ex-wife Margaret and the drowning of Sophie two weeks after their arrival, leaving behind a disintegrated family. The family's suffering from Sophie Mole's drowning become great when Ammu the daughter of the family experience a love affair with Velutha the families carpenter, a man from the "untouchable" or Paravan caste. Ammu's love affair with a member of an untouchable caste is considered a forbidden love according to the caste system in India, which divides people into classes and makes the lower class people "untouchable". Risking to interact with one of these untouchables, Ammu violates the caste system, which also causes the family to fall apart and also, Ammu's twins, Estha and Rahel to be separated from each other. Sophie Mol's unfortunate drowning, though, occurs in 1969, Roy's story begins twenty three years later, when Rahel comes back to home in India, to Estha where there is desire that the love of the twins for each other will heal their deep suffering. Rahel comes back to Ayemenem as an adult to "a decimated household, a dysfunctional twin and a decaying house" (45).

Much of Roy's third-person narrative is told mainly from the point of view of the two fraternal twin protagonists, Rahel and Estha. She constructs her narration moving backwards from present-day India to the fateful drowning that occurred twenty three years earlier, in 1969. With flashbacks from the present to the past; Roy fabricates her plot with an increasing suspense till the end of the novel. She structures her narration so skillfully that the malignant tragedy is not fully illustrated until the final scenes of the novel. Roy tells and reveals gradually the story of all characters and the shocking series of events throughout her text.

As at the outset of the paper has been pointed out, Roy's *The God of Small Things* is the story of the visit and the drowning of Sophie Mol resulting in the destruction of the innocent lives and their splitting up from

each other when she comes to see her Indian father, Chacko, during her Charismas holiday. Upon coming to India, Sophie Mol is not aware of the disaster waiting for her. One they she is out with her Indian cousins, Estha and Rahel, on the mysterious river in Ayemenem, she suddenly drowns which makes the family, especially, Margaret grieved. The catastrophic event occur even if English Margaret, who is “traveling to the Heart of Darkness, has been acknowledged by her friends to “take everything” and to “be prepared” on the grounds of the fact that “anything can happen to anyone” in India (267).

As Sophie’s mothers friend’s have estimated, the most horrifying incident she might experience in her life happens, and “green weed and river grime were woven into her beautiful redbrown hair” of her daughter, and her child’s eyelids were “nibbled at by fish” (251). Margaret never forgives herself for not listening to her friends, and taking Sophie to India but she understands her mistake very lately after her losing her daughter in India. Sophie Mole’s drowning is a metaphoric sign of the hegemony of the Eastern over the European, which has the power to swallow up the colonizers easily. This is also the power of the wilderness and primitiveness of Eastern that the colonial elements always fear and never resist. Postcolonial discourse maintains that the threat of the Eastern for the European is either to devour the European in the wilderness or to make the Europeans go wild. The death of Sophie Mol in Roy’s story metaphorically illustrates that there is no escape from the tragic fate waiting for the colonizer in the colonial land. As previously mentioned, the deep interaction with the colonizer creates not only the suffering of the colonizer but also that of the colonized that recognized and felt upset and anxious about the inferiority of their own culture when compare to that of the colonizer. The feeling of the inferiority created a community that was not glad about his existence, and that had no peace anymore. The colonized having felt their inferiority, appreciated everything that belonged to the colonizer and forget their own history, culture, and language.

To be precise, they transformed into a nation who had not culture of their own, and felt second-class thereby struggling to become a member of the superior culture of the colonized. Thus, as it is stated in novel several times “things can changes in a day” (32), implies the day on which the colonizer’s arrival has changed everything in the land of the colonized.

In *The God of Small Things*, Chacko Kochamma, the uncle of the twins, describes the colonized people as “prisoners of war”, as a result of which

their “dreams have been doctored” and they “belong nowhere”. According to him, it is a kind of war that has occupied their minds that they “have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made them adore their captures and despise themselves” (53) Frantz Fanon in his *A Dying Colonialism* (1965), argues that “the challenging of the very principle of foreign domination brings about essential mutations in the consciousness of the colonized, in the manner in which he perceives the colonizer, in his human states in the world” (Gandhi, 1998: 130). Seeing themselves inferior, the colonized people recognized that the only way to make their situation better is to become similar to the colonizer, and thus, they try to imitate the colonizers ideas, values and practices. They appreciate and value the colonizers way of living and try to imitate their culture in view of not having of their own. Roy in narrating Chacko’s thoughts reports:

Chacko told the twins though he hated to admit it, they were all anglophile. They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. ‘To understand history, ‘Chacko said, we have to go inside and listen to what they’re saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smells the smells.’ (52)

Roy in her novel narrates clearly how the colonized people appreciate the English culture and their considerable effort to become like them by way of imitation. There are seen perfectly in different behaviors of the natives in the novel toward the half English Chacko’s daughter Sophie Mole and her Indian twin cousins, Rahel and Estha. When Chacko’s half English daughter Sophie and her mother Margaret come to India, every body in the family is impatiently awaited for their arrival. Sophie Mole’s half English identity is important both for the members of the family and for the people outside. The importance of an English cousin can be obviously presented in the speech of a man from outside the family where Roy illustrates the scene as the following:

The twins squatted on their haunches, like professional adults gossip in the Ayemenem market.

They sat in silence for a while. Kuttappen mortified, the twins preoccupied with boat thought.

‘Has Chacko Saar’s Mol come?’ Kuttappen asked.

‘Must have Rahel said laconically.

‘Where is she?’

‘Who knows? Must be around somewhere. We don’t know.’

‘Will you bring her here for me to see?’

‘Can’t,’ Rahel said.

‘Why not?’

‘She has to stay indoors. She’s very delicate. If she gets dirty she’ll die.’
(209, 210)

The appreciation in his question about the Sophie Mol is more like to that of the Orgerndrink Lemondrink man, who sells beverages at the cinema, when he learns that Sophie is coming he says “‘from London’s? A new respect gleamed in uncle’s eyes. For a family with London connections” (110).

Roy’s protagonists, Rahel and Estha are suffering from the great admiration of their family for the English language and culture. They obtain their love of the family if they behave in English manners and hold English values. They are the children who are forced to neglect their own language and does not have any importance, and who “had to sing in English in obedient voices” (154). Baby Kochamma, the twin’s aunt corrects Estha when he makes a mistake in pronouncing an expression where he say ‘Thang God,’ (154). For Rahel and Estha speaking in English is a kind of obligation. They have been deprived of their own history, culture, values and language for many years by the colonizers, and they cannot survive themselves from the facts of colonialism. The twin’s aunt always forces them to talk in English. Roy narrates this situation as the following:

That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins’ private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines –‘impositions’ she called them - *I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English*. A hundred times each. When they were done, she scored them with her pen to make sure that old lines were not recycled for new punishments.

She had made them practice an English car song for the way back. They had to form the words properly, and be particularly careful about their production. (36)

The important fact here is that the contamination of the colonized is not their admiration for the English or their efforts to imitate them, but their inability to belong to neither the culture of the colonized nor that of the colonizer and they experience an identity problem. The colonized is alienated by imitating the culture of the colonizer from their own culture and at the same time the skin color and national origin of the colonized estranged them from the English culture. Thus, they gain a hybrid identity, a mix between native and colonial identity, neither fully one nor the other. Most of the problem about hybrid identities lies in its existence, which is, as Bill Ashcroft highlights, “the cross-breeding of the two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, ‘hybrid’ species”. (Ashcroft 1998: 118).

In other words, this ambivalent cultural identity does not belong definitely to the world of either the colonizer or the colonized. It is presented as an ‘other’ from both cultural identities. This mixed identity, hybridity, “has been recently associated with the work of Homi Bhabha, whose analysis of colonizer/colonized stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivity. Bhabha maintains that all the cultural statements and systems are structured in a space that he ‘names third’ the third space of the enunciation” (1994: 37). Cultural identity always comes out in this contradictory and ambivalent space which for Bhabha constructs the argument to a hierarchical ‘purity’ of cultures. Bhabha puts this in this way:

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems, are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. Fanon’s vision of revolutionary cultural and political change as a ‘fluctuating movement’ of occult instability could not be articulated as cultural *practice* without an acknowledgement of this indeterminate space of the subject(s) of enunciation. It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha, 1994: 74)

Roy in her story presents perfectly her twin protagonists Rahel and Estha as two hybrid characters. Notwithstanding, the twins, try not to imitate the English values and language, but they cannot escape from feeling inferior

when they compare themselves to their half English cousin, Sophie Mol, since they are just the imitation of English, not real ones. Roy depicts the difference between the twins and Sophie Mol throughout the novel. She describes Sophie Mol as one of the “little angles” who “were beach-colored and wore bell bottoms”, while Rahel and Estha are depicted as two evil where we are told: “Littledemons were mudbrown in Airport fairy frocks with forehead bumps that might turn into horns with fountains in love-in-Tokyos. And backward-reading habits. And if you cared to look, you could see Satan in their eyes. (179).

Baby Kochamma twin’s aunt also gives an expression on the difference between Sophie Mol and the twins. She describes Sophie Mol as “so beautiful that she reminded her of a wood- sprite. Of Ariel.” Ariel in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (144). While in describing the twins she says, “They’re sly. They’re uncouth. Deceitful. They are growing wild you can’t manage them” (149). This point maintains that such a great appreciation that they love even their children as long as they imitate the values of the other culture, and dissemble to be a member of that culture. Roy’s another character who suffers from being a hybrid aspect is Pappachi Kochamma, the grandfather of the twins whom with his strong passion to be an English man in manner and appearance.

Pappachi Ammu’s father is a man who after retiring from Government service in Delhi having worked for many years as an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute, and who come to live in Ayemenem with his wife, Mammachi, his son Chacko and his daughter Ammu till he dies. Pappachi tries always to imitate the English way of clothing and as Roy illustrates “until the day he died, even in the stifling Ayemenem heat, even single day, Pappachi wore a well prepared three-piece suit and his gold pocket watch” (49).

It is his strong passion to another culture that makes him dress a suit, not his traditional clothing, mumudu and “khaki Judhpurs though he had never ridden a horse in his life” (51). Ammu his daughter in describing such a great appreciation of the other culture where we are told “Ammu said that Pappachi was an incurable British CCP, which was short for *chhi chhi poach* and in Hindu meant shit-wiper” (51). Chacko also as Ammu is aware of how his father is keen on the English culture where Roy reports:

Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was *Anglophile*. He made Rahel and Estha look up *Anglophile* in the

Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary. It said *Person well disposed to the English*. The Estha and Rahel had to look up disposed Chacko said that in Pappachi's case it meant *Bring mind into certain state*. Which, Chacko said, meant that Pappachi's mind had been *brought into a state* which made him like the English. (52)

Although Pappachi's admiration to English culture is great but he is not able to the reality that he is not English in origin. Despite his big endeavor to be similar to English culture, he does it just in appearance, not in his manner, his way of thinking and attitudes. For instance, he is against to her daughter's education where he "insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (38), thereby, he let his daughter finish her school life the same year that he retires from his job in Delhi and moves to Ayemenem. Regarding to his wife's, Mammachi's, during a few month day spend in Vienna, she takes a violin course, the situation is quite similar to that of Ammu's, teacher, Launskuy Tieffethal, made the mistake of telling Pappachi that his wife was exceptionally talented and, in his opinion, potentially concert class" (50). To sum up, Pappachi does not tolerate any kind of success she achieves inching her talent in playing the violin.

Upon Pappachi's recognition that the jam and pickle is sold quickly and his wife's business getting better, he becomes irritated, so, he not only prefer not to help her with her works, but also beats her every night. Roy describing the scene concerning Pappachi's thoughts and attitudes states that:

Chacko came home for a summer vacation from Oxford. Her had grown to be a big man, and was, in those days, strong from rowing from Balliot. A week after he arrived he found Pappachi beating Mammachi in the study. Chacko strode into the room, caught Pappachi's vase-hand and twisted it around his back, 'I never want this to happen again' her told his father. 'Ever'" (48).

Although Pappachi tries to be appear as a civilized man, he cannot overcome to his other identity which makes him beat his wife, "with a brass flower vase" every night, and who "broke the bow of her violin and threw it in the river" (48).

The situation is the same for Chacko, Pappachi's son, because he also is another character who suffers from the hybridization process in terms of

not belonging to either the culture of the colonized or that of the colonizer. Roy in reporting Chacko's suffering of hybridization states that: "our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (53). This point highlights that the colonized always look down upon and scorns their own culture, thereby they are uprooted from their culture and appreciates whatever the colonizer has; therefore, they try to imitate them without being to be a member of it on account of not being European in blood.

Chacko educated at Oxford University, realizes that their country and mind have been captured by the colonizer and he depicts his own people as "anglophile" "a person well disposed to the English" (52). However, he himself is aware of being an anglophile, when he comes to loving something that belongs to the English culture. His anglophile identity is approved when he gets married to an English woman. As Ammu, his sister, regards it on as marrying "our conquerors". Chacko like his father's admiration of the English way of clothing appreciates the manners and attitudes an English woman has. Roy in portraying Chacko's admiration of his English wife states:

As for Chacko, Margaret Kochamma was the first female friend he had ever had. Not just the first woman that he had slept with, but his first real companion. What Chacko loved most about her was her self-sufficiency. Perhaps it wasn't remarkable in the average English women, but it was remarkable to Chacko.

He loved the fact that Margaret Kochamma didn't cling to him that she was uncertain about her feeling for him. That he never know till the last day whether or not she would marry him. He loved the way she would sit up naked in his bed, her long white back swiveled away from him, look at her watch and say in her practical way – 'Oops, I must be off.' He loved the way she wobbled to work every morning on her bicycle. He encouraged their differences in opinion, and inwardly rejoiced at her occasional outburst of exasperation at his decadence. (245-246).

Roy in giving the reason why Chacko admires Margaret, which is a kind of looking up down on Indian women, reports that, "He was grateful to his wife for not wanting to look after him. For not offering to tidy his room. For not being cloying mother. He grew too depend on Margaret Kochamma for not depending on him. He adored her for not adoring him"

(246). Although Chacko appreciates his English wife for not wanting to look after him, unlike his Indian mother, the same English woman leaves him just because he is not used to looking after himself, which is quite clear in the following description:

That it was impossible for him to consider making the bed, or washing clothes or dishes. That he didn't apologize for the cigarette burns in the new sofa. That he seemed incapable of buttoning up his shirt, knotting his tie and tying his shoe laces before presenting himself for a job interview (247).

The important point that arises here is that his marriage to a married woman becomes successful to the extent that he is able to hide his real Indian Identity and plays his role successfully as the husband of an English woman. The reason their marriage ends in divorce results in the interaction between his own culture as the colonized and the culture of his wife as the colonizer and his belonging to neither of them.

Although Chacko and Pappachi do their best to look like the colonizer both in manner and attitudes, they become the victims of the interaction with the colonizers' culture that is regarded as superior. Despite their endeavor to imitate the colonizer, considering their behavior throughout the novel it is impossible for them to escape from their own identity, being Indian in blood, not English. Roy, as a postcolonial writer, in her novel tries to focus on the sufferings of the colonized originated from the interaction with the colonized.

Besides Roy's hybrid characters which can be understood as an evidence of the contamination arrived with the colonizer, in order to prove how dreadful suffering the arrival of the colonizer has brought to the colonial land, the day on which Sophie Mol come to India is used as metaphorically, and it stands for the coming of the colonizers. Sophie Mol with her English mother Margaret comes from England to India to see her Indian father, Chacko. Her coming to India is important because it stands for that of the colonizer and in what ways it has brought about the sufferings of the people in the colonial territory. Roy explains throughout the novel the great influence of Sophie Mol in disturbing the tranquil situation in India and the destructive effects of her visit. The most shattering effects can be seen in the Estha and Rahel character, both of whom "hadn't seen each other since Estha's return in a train with his pointy shoes rolled into his khaki hold all"(32). Rahel immediately after separation of Estha from Ayemenem loses her mother Ammu, too. Rahel also loves her Ayemenem and her twin

brother and wander from school to school. On the whole, Sophie Mol's arrival to India changed their faith and caused all these disastrous events. The life in Ayemenem before her arrival was peaceful and tranquil. Roy in illustrating the Ayemenem maintains that "Here, however, it was peace time and the family in the Plymouth traveled without fear or foreboding"(35). Sophie Mol's arrival representing the colonizer disturbs the peaceful life in Ayemenem. This is obviously observable when Roy portrays the situation as, "You couldn't see the river from the window anymore... and their has come a time when uncles became fathers, mother's lovers and cousins died and had funerals. It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened" (31).

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