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## It is all about Big God versus Small God: A Reader's Response to Chapter One of *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract:

The approach employed in the present article is binarism. Theoretically, in my opinion, binarism seems to operate at cognitive level. It pertains to value orientation in the subjective world of human beings and thereby to the world orientation. In order to define the place of a thing in the world and an individual's association and desirability, we are forced to rely on binary approach of studying the world. Coming to literature, I discuss the binary terms of (historical) fact and fiction. Here, I have tried to apply the binary approach and have tried to analyze the binary value orientation in Arundhati Roy's novel 'The God of Small Things. I want to demonstrate that it is the tension between the superior and Inferior in the fiction as well as in fact that forms the subject matter of the chapter one of the novel. The present study is based on the textual interpretation. The focus of the study is to analyze various discourses based on the caste stratification, the patriarchal joint family, the feminist voices, the political grouping etc voiced in the novel.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural Self, Innocence, Big God, Small God.

### 1 Introduction:

*The God of Small Things*, the Booker prize winning Novel by Arundhati Roy, is a powerful predicament of a powerlessness of the people so called citizen of India. The novel presents an excellent and deep study and understanding, sociological and psychological, of various social groups and social sections of the society. Roy has succeeded to a great extent to make those voices speak which silenced in the actual and practical, welfare, democratic, socialistic and liberal society in India. Multiple Voices of the various downtrodden sections of Indian society articulate their whims, wishes, aspiration silently. Various groups such as dalits (untouchables), lower class people, racial subalterns, women etc were exposed to talking in the fiction which they never do in reality. The question which wonders most of the readers is what God in "the God of Small Things" stand for? Or what can it stand for? Or at last what should it stand for? When asked to the author of the text. She doesn't seem to reveal a definite answer. She seems to keep the interpretation open to the readers or she wants everybody to discover it in the text.

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 is the way children see things or whether it is the insect life in the book, or the fish or the stars --- there is a not accepting of what we think of as adult boundaries (Interview with Kingsworth).

The answer starts with the phrase 'to me' which means that the meaning is not universally applicable and an absolute one. The interpretation is open to every reader of the text. The

reader of the text has either to discover the meaning or invent it for himself/herself. This study, of chapter one only, is analytic in nature and the approach followed is reader centred.

## 2 Social and National concern Versus the Individual concern

The concern of social and national level seems the basic motive and purpose of the novel. The novel has voiced those voices which remain silent in practical society of India. The novel has raised and addressed those problems and issues of Indian Society which are social and Psychological in nature. We have this passage from the novel in which the main protagonist shows the priority of concern of social and national level than the personal concern.

“But when they made love he was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else. Someone watching. Looking out of the window at the sea. At a boat in the river. Or a passerby in the mist in a hat. He was exasperated because he didn't know what that look *meant*. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair. He didn't know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that *personal* despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered. It was never important enough. Because Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening. So Small God laughed a hollow laugh, and skipped away cheerfully. Like a rich boy in shorts. He whistled, kicked stones. The source of his brittle elation was the relative smallness of his misfortune. He climbed into people's eyes and became an exasperating expression.” ----- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (19)

The trauma of the national and social problems of Indian Society has been shown hidden in the eyes of Rahel, the main protagonist of the novel. She has ignored and that way sacrificed herself to the national concern. The social and national concern has found priority among most of the people who have forgotten their self like Rahel for the national cause. The small God, in the form of personal concern, is sacrificed in the societies like India where the big God, the national and social concern, becomes more important. When the nation and society suffer at the hands of a layer of the corrupt and moral less people, the trauma of such concern kills the personal self of the people and brings about alienation of the common people.

## 3 Social and cultural self versus Individual self

The small God and the big God present the two aspects of power inner and outer respectively. The big God, the power operating outside human self, is stronger than the small God, the inner power of self. The big God curbs and subordinates the small God. The small God feels helpless, subordinated, suppressed, and insignificant in comparison to the big God. The big God is a the culmination of various powers together such as the power of state, the power of society, the power of nation, the power of culture, the power of History, the power of religion, the power of community, the power of the social institutions in operation and many more. The power of all these agencies operates through formal as well as informal

means. The formal include the law, the police and military etc and the later operates through beliefs, values, social and religious norms, social sanctions etc. The small God is realised through individual's emotions, desires, ambitions, aspirations, freedom of thought and expression and so on. But the big God is always more important, considered, in practice, as prior to the God of small things.

Roy brilliantly presents us the fact that individual and his/her individual conscience is slowly and steadily engulfed by the collective conscience. Though the individuality is able to maintain its traces of being in existence at sometime but can neither separate nor define itself without the collectivity. All boundaries within which the individuality can roam are set by collectivity. The collectivity indoctrinates the very composition of individuality through the processes like that of socialization and leaves little room to escape and think beyond the limits set by it. Roy following paragraph from the novel gives us the hidden picture of this reality.

Edges, borders, boundaries, brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons. Short creatures with long shadows, patrolling the Blurry End. Gentle half-moons have gathered under their eyes and they are old as Ammu was when she died. Thirty-one.

Not old.

Not young.

But a viable die-able age. (Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* 2006 p3)

Roy has another way to explain us the power of society and collectivity over the individual. This way talks about the physical violation of the norms of collectivity. When an individual is momentarily able to relieve himself/herself from his collective conscience and physically violates the norms of it, the consequences, in various forms, are ready to follow. Social disqualification in general and its institutions in particular bring the wrath for individual.

Ammu asked for the Station House Officer and when shown into his office, she told him that there had been a terrible mistake and that she wanted to make a statement. She asked to see Velutha.

Inspector Thomas Mathew's moustaches bustled like the friendly Air India Maharajah's, but his eyes were sly and greedy.

'It's a little too late for all this, don't you think?' he said. He spoke the coarse Kottayam dialect of Malayalam. He stared at Ammu's breast as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children. Ammu said she'd see about that. Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton.

This event in the novel has opened our eyes and has taken us close to the basic social reality in operation in Indian society. What I mean by basic social reality here is the reality of social self of the members of a society like India. The policemen, being members of Indian society, have a strong social and cultural self before being POLICE (polite, Obedient, Loyal, Intelligent, Courteous, And Efficient). They ignore all these supra-structural realities when there is the question of the basic reality. They are simply not able to abandon the conscience of being part of the society and culture. There is always a thrill going on in the minds of social servants whether to follow their social and cultural conscience or the newly imparted

values of secularism and secular morality. The case may not be always same as in above event of the novel, for sometimes the rules and laws of administrative professionalism are derived from social and cultural realities as in case of western societies and in those case the individual is successfully able to marry his social intention with his/her individual behaviour. But at time, as in Indian context, the system of governance and administration is somewhat alien to the social and cultural Psyche and the individual is forced by the social and cultural self to follow it rather than the rules and regulations of the profession and administration.

Another dimension is added to this reality by Estha and his relation to his social and cultural environment. This passage gives an account of the situation of Estha in the novel.

Estha had always been a quiet child, so no one could pinpoint with any degree of accuracy exactly when (the year, if not the month or day) he had stopped talking. Stopped talking altogether, that is. The fact is that there wasn't an 'exactly when'. It had been a gradual winding down and closing shop. A barely noticeable quietening. As though he had simply run out of conversation and had nothing left to say. Yet Estha's silence was never awkward. Never intrusive. Never noisy. It wasn't an accusing, protesting silence as much as a sort of aestivation, a dormancy, the psychological equivalent of what lungfish do to get themselves through the dry season, except that in Estha's case the dry season looked as though it would last forever.

Over time he had acquired the ability to blend into the background of whatever he was into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets – to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye. It usually took strangers a while to notice him even when they were in the same room with him. It took them even longer to notice that he never spoke. Some never noticed at all.

Has anybody among us thought about how many people around us are as silent as Estha in the novel? How many of them have realised as Estha does in the Novel that it hardly matters whether they express their queries and complaints or remain silent. The social and cultural environment around them is hardly aware of the fact that they even exist. It has forgotten the date and time since they are silent as in case of Estha or there is even a doubt whether they have been allowed to speak like that of subaltern. The social and cultural environment around us does not even bother to take notice of the number of Esthas and their tragedy of quietness. Estha has lost every hope of being heard and has solemnly resolved not to express himself for the reasons unknown and unspoken. Instead he has learnt and thereby acquired the art of hiding himself and is now quite trained in not allowing himself to be noticed.

#### **4 Innocence versus Experience**

Estha, an innocent child, has either accepted the belief that if they had been born on the bus, they would have gotten free bus rides for the rest of their lives without asking for reason and authenticity or he has formed hypothesis about it. Roy has forced the attention of thinking minds to see and observe things through their eyes. The children live in a different world and have different and unique world view. They receive things without much doubt.

According to Estha, if they'd been born on the bus, they'd have got free bus rides for the rest of their lives. It wasn't clear where he'd got this information from, or how he knew these things, but for years the twins harboured a faint resentment against their parents for having diddled them out of a lifetime of free bus rides.

There is another example of how the children imagine things and explain them for themselves.

Rahel thought of someone who had taken the trouble to go up there with cans of paint, white for the clouds, blue for the sky, silver for the jets, and brushes, and thinner. She imagined him up there someone like Velutha, bare bodied shining, sitting on a plank, swinging from the scaffold in the high dome of the church, painting silver jets in a blue church sky.

Everybody is forced to rewind the life and to go back to his/her childhood after reading this paragraph of the novel. This is exactly how the children imagine things and explain them to themselves and others without having a serious concern about what is possible, reasonable and rational. The things like this hardly matter when imagination is in operation in general and child imagination in particular.

In the mean time let us close our eyes and think for a moment and ask ourselves the question why these imaginative explanations seem strange to us even though we were perfectly alright with them when we were in that age. Has experience taken over as a directive authority of our mind? Have we stopped being what is termed as innocent? Or are we so called more realistic than before? Let me attempt an answer to these questions. The first thing which I take up here is the relation of our mind to our age. It is being said that the human brain does not have power to grow in terms of its basic abilities like IQ. Experience is the only process which goes on and contributes to our process of knowing the world around us. It is the only variable which changes during the lifetime of an individual since his/her childhood. So, in my opinion, experience is the culprit which brutally murders the innocence.

## **5 Instincts versus Morality**

Morality nowadays, weakened like a child suffering from a deficiency disease, has lost its vigour and all its grounds which it used to hold in the field of life. A strong opponent, healthy and balanced like an athlete, in the form of instinct which used to remain subsided has emerged on the scene. It has got the hold of all those positions and statuses where morality used to rule once. It has acquired the important, prior and powerful position enough to rule over the morality, the age old enemy of it. Roy's Novel has same message for the in these lines:

Somedays he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides brought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils.

Other days he walked down the road. Past the new, freshly baked, iced, gulf-money houses bilt by nurses, masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places. Past the resentful older houses tinged green with envy, cowering in their private driveways among their private rubber trees. Each a tottering fiefdom with an epic of its own.

Roy has vividly pictured the material instinct of present society, visible and standing in the form of the social and environmental exploitation. This instinct has successfully dragged its capable enemies like happiness and sense of social responsibility away from the lives of the people and has brought in its friends like misery and alienation seen everywhere in the contemporary scene.

In the novel Roy visits her memory and reminds us of a significant event in the history of human civilization in these lines.



Sometimes Estha walked past Lucky Press – old comrade K. N. M. Pillai's printing press, once the Ayemenem office the communist party, where midnight study meetings were held, pamphlets with rousing lyrics of Marxist Party songs were printed and distributed. The flag that fluttered on the roof had grown limp and old. The red had bled away.

Comrade Pillai himself came out in the mornings in a greying aertex vest, his balls silhouetted against his soft white mundu. He oiled himself with warm, peppered coconut oil, kneading his old, loose flesh that stretched willingly of his bones, like chewing gum. He lived alone now. His wife, Kalyani, had died of ovarian cancer. His son, Lenin, had moved to Delhi, where he worked as a services contractor for foreign embassies.

If comrade Pillai was outside his house oiling himself when Estha walked past, he made it a point to greet him.

'Estha Mon!' he would call out, in his high, piping voice, frayed and fibrous now, like sugarcane stripped of its bark. 'Good morning! Your daily constitutional?'

Estha would walk past, not rude, not polite. Just quiet.

Comrade Pillai would slap himself all over to get his circulation going. He couldn't tell himself whether Estha recognized him after all those years or not. Not that he particularly cared. Though his part in the whole thing had by no means been a small one, comrade Pillai didn't hold himself in any way personally responsible for what had happened. He dismissed the whole business as the Inevitable Consequence of Necessary Politics. The old omelette and egg thing. But then, comrade K. N. M. Pillai was essentially a political man. A professional omeletteer. He walked through the world like a chameleon. Never revealing himself, never appearing not to. Emerging through chaos unscathed.

This description in the novel voices the defeat of a historical event, an important and a significant one, in the history of reign of Morality which has now taken over by the reign of Instinct. Communism, theoretically being a movement of immaterialist morality, was an uprising against the rising power of material Instinct but has lost its vigour and actuality. It exists nowadays in the form of fossilized images on the walls of old buildings and the boards which witness its existence at some point of time. The brutal and insane rule of the Instinct has destroyed it from within by infecting and thereby weakening the very location where from the empire of morality once used to operate. The human mind is nowadays indoctrinated by it in such a way that it operates as a faithful servant and a faithful soldier simultaneously. Lucky press is a past now and Comrade K. N. M Pillai a worn out image of what once existed in reality. The midnight study meetings, the pamphlet of rousing lyrics of Marxist Party songs etc are at present fighting for a place in the contemporary memory. The flags that fluttered once on the roof have grown limp and too old to pay attention to.

Comrade K. N. M Pillai has lost his wife by ovarian cancer and his son has left him alone as if an outdated and useless enterprise which has no relevance and benefits at present and has moved to Delhi to obey and worship the new, the powerful, and the popular Big God. Comrade K. N. M Pillai's irrelevance and uselessness is intensified by Estha's non recognition of him who was once an admirer of him.

Comrade K. N. M Pillai has himself accepted the defeat of the old empire and has saved himself from being responsible for it. He has discovered or for that matter invented a substitute culprit responsible for what has happened in the form of 'necessary politics' as he calls it. Though himself a political man, he successfully throws away the blame of being

unsuccessful. He being very professional of what he termed as 'necessary politics' is able to emerge unscathed through chaos. Though the same emerging big God has infected his faculties as well but he is able to hide the symptoms like a chameleon hides himself to catch a prey.

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