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The God of Small Things: Celebration of Mininarratives

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This paper aims at tracing postmodernism in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. Amorphous though postmodernism is, it is usually characterized by fragmentation, pastiche, minimal affirmation, blurring of boundaries, multiplicity, and what Lyotard and Jameson call "an incredulity towards metanarratives" (qtd. in Woods: 23) and "a cultural dominant" (4) respectively. *The God of Small Things* seeks to deal not with one reality, but several realities, exploring every reality from various angles as seen and experienced by different characters. The events pertaining to the subaltern characters such as Velutha and Ammu posit that individuals can no more be controlled by the grand ideologies. The novel travesties the idea of God, who is no more in control of small things; rather small things have an ultimate power over God. By foregrounding the marginalized characters, Roy makes them transgress boundaries concerning caste, family, love, law, gender and religion.

Lyotard is of the opinion that postmodernism is characterized by the demise of grandnarratives. Knowledge in the postmodern era can no longer be legitimated or sanctioned according to the great narratives that have shaped western knowledge, like the notion of progress embedded in the Enlightenment, or the notion of social liberation through history embedded in Marxism, or the release from unconscious trauma harboured by Freudian theory. Indeed, Lyotard regards such narratives as violent and tyrannical in their imposition of a totalizing pattern and a false universality on actions, events and things. Expressing his incredulity towards metanarratives, he writes:

We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives- we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for post-modern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative [petit recit] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science. (qtd. in Woods: 21-22)

Lyotard asserts that the emancipation of humanity as proclaimed by grand narrative such as Marxism is impossible. Claims like the emancipation of the working subject turn out to be a big fiasco in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. In the following extract Roy makes fun of Marxism through the portrayal of the character of Chacko:

Chacko was a self-proclaimed Marxist. He would call pretty women who worked in the factory to his room, and on the pretext of lecturing them on labour rights and trade union law, flirt with them outrageously. He would call them Comrade, and insist that they call him Comrade back (which made them giggle). Much to their embarrassment and Mammachi's dismay, he forced them to sit at table with him and drink tea. (65)

Ammu ridicules Chacko's Marxism by saying that it was "all hogwash" (65). Likewise, Comrade Pillai, a leader of the local communist party, uses Marxism for personal gains rather than for the benefit of the workers belonging to his party. He is a

caricature of the local politician, an epitome of all the unpleasant, deceptive aspects of a degenerate political tradition which is nothing more than a means of self-promotion. The cruelest irony is that he belongs to a party that represents workers' interests and exists on the pledge to protect them from all kinds of socio-economic exploitation. Roy's portrayal of comrade Pillai as a hypocrite, Chacko's deceptive stances and the freedom with which the police is allowed to unleash barbarism on the poor like Velutha demonstrates the Marxism's failure to form a classless society.

The idea embedded in Christianity that the whole world and the whole of history is part of one grand narrative, the working out of God's plan: everything fits into this story; everything has its place breaks down in the novel. That postmodernism celebrates micronarratives or minimal affirmation instead of grand ideologies is reflected in the very title of the novel, *The God of Small Things* in which the capital God is inverted. If marriages count as big things in the world of Ayemenem, then they are what force the members of the family to seek pleasure instead in the small things, those things that go unrecognized by society. Unable to have Father Mulligan, Baby Kochamma becomes obsessed with the small thing of writing to him in her diary; Ammu makes love with Velutha, a small thing, hidden on the riverbank away from others' eyes. Small things achieve more recognition than big things. In the case of Pappachi and his moth, the latter, a small thing, achieves a place in history while its rightful discoverer is given no credit at all. As the coolie suggests, small things are the driving force behind all action. He says, "Big Man the Lantern. Small Man the Tallow-Stick"(89). Although the lantern magnifies the light, it is the tallow-stick that provides it. In the same way, although the big things in life usually get most of the attention, the small things provide much of the impetus behind everything that happens. The family members like to think that they have control over the events in their lives. But it is their secrets, carefully hidden away like their pickles and preserves, which really have the influence.

Postmodernism celebrates the dismantling of the historical truths and the subverting of the orthodoxy. Ammu flies in the face of the androcentricism. When she realizes that she is discriminated at home, she decides to leave Ayemenem and goes to Calcutta. It is at the wedding reception there that she comes across her future husband. Against the traditional marriage, she not only marries him but also divorces him when the choice proves wrong. She avoids surname after divorce. Estha and Rahel have no surname because Ammu is thinking of reverting to her maiden name though she feels that choosing between her husband's name and her father's name does not "give a woman much of a choice" (36). Ammu also defies love laws by becoming involved in the illicit relationship with a Paravan, Velutha. What seems an illicit relationship between a divorced touchable woman and untouchable Paravan is actually a union of two rebels protesting against hypocritical laws of society. Although the ultimate outcome of this love affair is the tragic death of an "Untouchable" by the "Touchable Boots" of the state police, this is an event that makes a travesty of the idea of God. God is no more in control of "small things"; rather small things have an ultimate power over God, turning him to "The God of loss" (265). Ammu and Vethula, the God of Small Things, consciously and unconsciously resist the division of caste, race and gender perpetuated by patriarchy.

She is equally defiant in her assessment of her brother and dares express her views courageously. She challenges her mother's obsession with her son and refuses to admit that Chacko is "brilliant", "made of prime ministerial material" or "one of the

cleverest men of India". Ammu says that "there was only one person in the family who was a fit candidate for biographical blackmail and that was Chacko himself" (38). While her mother and aunt subscribe to the male chauvinist notions of "Men's Needs", Ammu criticizes Chacko for having "hogwash" Marxism and characterizes him as an "Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality -a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood"(65).

Postmodernism, according to Linda Hutcheon, is a 'contradictory enterprise: its art forms . . . use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention. . . (qtd. in Lewis: 113). Postmodern writing is marked by temporal disorder. It disrupts the linear coherence of narrative by warping the sense of significant time. In Roy's world of *The God of Small Things*, things are illogical and unpredictable. The narrative starts twenty-three years after the main events have taken place. The story of Ammu's death, for instance, unfolds in a nonlinear fashion. First we witness her cremation, the final affirmation that she is no longer living. Then the moment when she begins to come alive again for the first time after the divorce, when she becomes attracted to Velutha, is shown in a series of flashbacks. Roy makes allusions to the events surrounding Sophie Mol's death. Still she does not reveal these things, keeping them as hidden for the reader as they are for the characters. Roy suggests that if life is unpredictable and nonlinear, a story about life should be equally so.

If the famous epigraph to "E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910): 'Live in fragments no longer. Only connect.'" (qtd. in Lewis: 117) represents modernism's motto as it lays emphasis upon the need to find new forms of continuity, an utterance by a character of Donald Barthelme, "Fragments are the only forms I trust"(qtd. in Lewis: 117) hints at the postmodernist fiction's wariness of wholeness. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is replete with fragments or sections, separated by space, titles, numbers or symbols. Multiple typefaces, fonts, characters and miscellaneous arrangements make the layout look so eccentric. "John Hawkes once divulged that when he began to write he assumed that 'the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme'" (qtd. in Lewis: 115). Arundhati Roy seems to have sledgehammered at least some of these literary cornerstones into oblivion. The plot of the novel is pounded into small slabs of event and circumstance and characters disintegrate into a bundle of twitching desires. The novel is divided into twenty one chapters, each having a title of its own. That it celebrates fragments is evident in the numerous sub-titles it contains beginning with "Paradise Pickles & Preserves" and culminating in "The Cost of Living". At the end of the opening chapter, readers encounter an uncommon page that merely contains a line in the middle both preceded and followed by spaces:

HOWEVER, for practical purposes, in a hopelessly practical
World . . . (34)

Raymond Federman says, "In those spaces where there is nothing to write, the fiction writer can, at any time, introduce material (quotations, pictures, diagrams, charts, designs, pieces of other discourses, etc.) totally unrelated to the story". (qtd. in Lewis: 116). Delineating postmodern fiction, Hans Berterns asserts, "In the 1960s and 1970s the mostly realistic fiction of the 1950s begins to give way to a sort of writing that takes extraordinary liberties with the traditions of fiction" (138). The narrative is punctuated by various interruptions such as numbers, questionnaire, word fragments etc:

- (1) Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes.
 - (2) Wild geese that flew with the moon on their wings.
 - (3) Bright copper kettles.
 - (4) Doorbells and sleighbells and schnitzel with noodles.
 - (5) Etc.
- And then . . . i. e.:
- (a) *Did Captain von Clapp-Trapp shiver his leg?*
He did not.
 - (b) *Did Captain von Clapp-Trapp blow spit-bubbles? Did he?*
He did most certainly not (106).

Nictitating
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ing (189).

Banana Jam (in his *old* best writing)

Crush ripe banana. Add water to cover and cook on a very hot fire till fruit is soft. (195)

Describing Sophie Mol on a little camp cot, Roy says, "Bluegreyblue eyes snapped open.

A Wake

A Live

A Lert (238).

The aforementioned extracts from the novel suggest that unexpected and unsettling twists abound in the postmodern fiction.

Having probed into the text, it can be concluded that the waves of postmodernism reverberates around the novel to the fullest. The monolithic view that mandating a particular grandnarrative such as Marxism will lead to social liberation or the formation of a classless society no longer has credibility in the postmodern world. When the God of Big things turns out to be violent and tyrannical, the only option, the novel posits, left is to celebrate the god of small things embodied in Velutha or Ammu. The big stories invented and prescribed by the western world as to the movement of fiction in linear or chronological order and the construction of sentences with no deviation or departure from the canonical linguistic norms no more serve the heterogeneity or multiplicity of the postmodern world.

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