

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue-5 (October 2016)

The Criterion 

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.the-criterion.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

***The God of Small Things* or Story of Desperate Love**

Aju Mukhopadhyay

Introduction

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is a Booker Award winning novel. It is mainly the story of Ammu, a girl oppressed and neglected during childhood and Velutha, the low caste worker of their family business. By a quirk of fate Ammu got a chance to bloom in her married life but that too was almost nipped in the bud. This she thought to be so due to her mistake in the choice of her husband. She again became a victim of oppression, suppression and pity in tune with the traditional Indian household when she came back home abandoning her husband's shelter, thus treated like a widow. Her love with a man below her social status was the natural outburst of her youth to satisfy her deprived physical desire at any cost as if to grasp any straw to see the game of life to the end. The fire was ignited by the conjugal life of her brother with his wife. Knowing the consequences of their actions full well they were engaged in it desperately. It may be said to be a story of desperate love. The story is enacted at Ayemenem, a village near Kottayam, Kerala, India. The story seems to carry some biographical aspects of the author's life in the immediate postcolonial phase of India.

The Story

Relating to the childhood of Ammu the author writes, "In her growing years, Ammu had watched her father weave his hideous web He donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father." (Roy 180)

In this description what is poignant is the father's character which is not universal but peculiar to her situation. While fathers in patriarchal society have dominated the female members of the household, it was not usually to the extent mentioned here. It is double ill luck for the female child when she is partially treated by her parents compared to her brother the male child of the family at home and again to be deprived of her legitimate honour and position in her husband's household. This was in wild practice in Indian households until very recently. Neglect of the female aspect of human life is a notable attitude in India. The best proof of this is the destruction of female foetus in the womb using the medical technology to the detriment of human life.

Ammu and Chacko were brother and sister. Chacko was given chances for higher education. He became a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and the family indulged in all his eccentricities and excesses to which nobody else was allowed. He married an English lady, Margaret Kochamma, as she became known in the family. But Ammu passed her final school examination when her father retired and they moved from Delhi to Ayemenem. Her father considered that no more education was necessary for a girl who should be ready for marriage. The children learnt from their babyhood what is discrimination between boy and girl from birth.

“Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them. There was very little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework. Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals came Ammu’s way. Two years went by. Her eighteenth birthday came and went unnoticed. Ammu grew desperate. All day she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother Eventually Pappachi agreed to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lived in Calcutta.” (Roy 38-39)

There Ammu chanced to meet her future husband on a wedding reception. The would-be groom, an assistant manager in a tea garden in Assam proposed to Ammu five days later. “Ammu didn’t pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. 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.

“Ammu had an elaborate Calcutta wedding. Later looking back on the day Ammu realized that the slightly feverish glitter in her bridegroom’s eyes had not been love, or even excitement at the prospect of carnal bliss, but approximately eight large pegs of whisky. Straight. Neat.

“Ammu’s father-in-law was Chairman of the Railway Board and had a Boxing Blue from Cambridge He gave the young couple a custom-painted, powder-pink Fiat as a present which after the wedding he drove off in himself, with all the jewellery and most of the other presents that they had been given.” (Roy 39)

In their circle in Assam tea garden Ammu gained reputation for her beauty and she gave birth to twins, Esthappan and Rahel. For some time she commanded attraction from all. But in no time her husband grew not just heavy drinker but full-blown alcoholic with deviousness and tragic charm. It came to such a pass that his European boss was almost at the point of sacking him but gave him a chance to survive if he took long rest in a hospital keeping his wife at the

care of his boss. He began badgering daily to his wife to accept the proposal so he could survive in service. Ammu felt disgusted and finally left for Ayemenem with her two innocent boy and girl children.

Here the husband is alcoholic without much of lust and romance for conjugal life. He is not attracted to any other woman too. A man may not have much of the element of lust in him but to become alcoholic without any cause is little puzzling. Usually there remains a cause behind one becoming an addict like Amit in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* becomes an alcoholic out of frustration. A question may be raised as to why did he propose to Ammu when in his lone life he wasn't interested in conjugal or carnal life? It wasn't a negotiated marriage. Was it to get an aid for life? The alcoholic turned to a cuckold when in danger of losing his job. Then it is learnt that he regained his service life elsewhere. Ammu might have felt insulted when the husband asked her to be a kept of the boss for his own self-interest but there wasn't any other cause of deep disagreement between them besides his lack of interest for the opposite sex. So this must be the apparent cause of Ammu's choosing separation even at the risk of losing all her future. But there might be the other points. We get a clue to it when we read, "Her twins were sleeping the way they did when they were exhausted –with their eyes half open, two small monsters. They got that from their father." (Roy331) On the whole the wife did not find her honour and womanhood protected in the hands of her husband. This was another cause besides her frustration in enjoying her female status; enough for her decision to leave him.

After her coming back to Ayemenem began the age old tale of an Indian widow daughter returning to father's house for a miserable existence and surely so after the death of her parents when her brother would be the owner of the patriarchal family property. In the fifties of the twentieth century the laws officially changed for the better, to some extent. Now it has been further amended in favour of the girl child of the family. Though it cannot be guessed exactly in which year the story happened, it may be assumed that it was in the immediate postcolonial phase of India.

After Ammu returned like a widow though her husband was living, his father or Pappachi did not remain for long. Mammachi was there but the rule fell in the hands of her brother, Chacko. He had his wife Margaret and daughter, Sophie Mol. Margaret came after the death of her second husband to Ayemenem, as invited by her first husband.

"In the Plymouth, Ammu was sitting in front, next to Chacko. She was twenty-seven that year, and in the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that for her, life had been lived. She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man." (Roy 38)

Once when Chacko and Margaret Kochamma, his wife, were at Cochin leaving their child Sophie Mol with their family members including cousins, Rahel and Estha (the children of Ammu) to play with. The three children went out in an expedition in a boat when the river Meenachal was in spate due to heavy rains. Losing their way in the dark they lost their boat. While Rahel and Estha could somehow come to the shore, Sophie Mol, perhaps not accustomed to swim as her cousins, was drowned and her body came floating down the river where Meenachal approached the backwater of the sea. All the children could be traced only in the morning; two living and one dead. While this accident happened, Ammu was locked in a room for her misadventure, adultery with Velutha, the workman employed in the family factory. Her secret affairs with the hero were exposed creating gossips in village corners.

Velutha, Paapen Paraven's son, a poor young low caste man living in a hut was attracted by Ammu the fire, who felt herself unfulfilled; now treated differently with her children in the family like an undignified sinner while her brother was given all indulgence by the elders in his private dealings with the women in the family factory, manufacturing pickles. Chacko's mother, Mammachi helped her son to fulfill his needs, "Chacko had moved out of his room and would sleep in Pappachi's study so that Sophie Mol and Margaret Kochamma could have his room. It was a small room, with a window that overlooked the dwindling, somewhat neglected rubber plantation One door connected it to the main house and another (the separate entrance that Mammachi had installed for Chacko to pursue his 'Men's needs' discreetly) lead directly out into the side mittam." (Roy 238)

From this it can easily be guessed how a blatant discrimination is made deliberately between the brother and sister coming out of the same parents. And the truant is played by the female head herself on her own girl child. This was the custom of the time in many Indian families which the writer has rightly exposed before the public. This was one of the reasons which made Ammu desperate without any hope of remedy to her situation, this dragged her to revolt against her family and society.

The relationship between Ammu and Velutha seems to have grown not only out of physical attraction but out of desperation on the part of Ammu because she became restive after the failure of her marriage and at the treatment she received from her paternal family. It was beyond the dreams of low caste Velutha to mix up with such a respectable lady as Ammu but once in contact with her it was beyond his ken to disengage himself from that magnetic force. Perhaps he had a distant hope of getting help from his party bosses. Ammu jumped into the crude fire of love making with the available male counterpart in her lonely drained out life rather than feeling any aesthetic love for him. Even her married life with an alcoholic did not give a normal satisfaction or justification to her innocent youth. She held on to Velutha who was chained to her. It was an obsessive relationship for both. Chacko's mother, the otherwise

sophisticated lady of the house, called and abused Velutha in filthy languages. Spitting on his face she retrenched him from the job.

Velutha's approaching his senior leader, comrade Pillai of the communist party, was utterly futile as their affair was already known to all and was taken as an exception in the private life of a comrade. He was guilty in their eyes as Ammu was guilty in the eyes of her family members and society. They noticed red varnish on the nails of the lover Velutha as unpardonable! "This is a little village,' Comrade Pillai was saying, 'People talk. I listen to what they say You should know that Party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life It is not in the party's interest to take up such matters.'" (Roy 287)

The Consummation

Hereafter the movement of the lovers becomes rapid. Their fast movement leading to the inevitable consequences, aptly described, creates a unique dramatic effect and the story of the novel as conceived from the beginning gains a momentum. The forward and backward movement of the description of the story takes the reader to the inevitable end.

Velutha felt sleepy out of tiredness on the way home where his father was waiting with weapon to receive him. But "His feet walked him to the river. As though they were the leash and he was the dog.

"History walking the dog

"Things will get worse, he thought to himself. Then better. He was walking swiftly now, towards the Heart of Darkness. As lonely as a wolf.

"The God of Loss.

"The God of Small Things.

"Naked but for his nail varnish." (Roy 288-290)

Ammu on the other hand, "Leaned against the door in the darkness, she felt her dream, her afternoon-man 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

"Ammu longed for him. Ached for him with the whole of her biology." (Roy 330)

The description is symbolic and metaphoric. We may compare this physical longing for the beloved with a poem of medieval Bengali Vaishnava poet Gnanadas; “Rupalagi ankhi jhure gune mon bhor/*Prati anga lagi kande prati anga mor*” (Viewing the beauty my eyes stream with tears, mind is engrossed in quality / Each part of my body aches for each part of beloved’s body).¹

Here the desire for love making is aesthetically complete, poetically fit. But in the novel under discussion the beloved possesses no physical beauty, rather he has a deformed body. Nevertheless, he is fit for the crude purpose she desires him. She has given up all hope for beauty or any aesthetic satisfaction in life, left is the bare carnality and she plunges into the fire of it. Velutha, the human insect, has already been in it. So at the risk of whatever peril it consummates.

After the initials as between a man and woman in such a situation which we do not know how long it took, desperate and hungry as she was, the body-dance took no time to begin. In spite of the fact she very bitterly resented the humbug, talkative Chacko, she returned to the dinner table.

“She remained sitting for a while. Long after the song had ended. Then suddenly she rose from her chair and walked out of her world like a witch. To a better, happier place.

“She moved quickly through the darkness She didn’t know what it was that made her hurry through the undergrowth. That turned her walk into a run. That made her arrive on the banks of Meenachal breathless. Sobbing, as though she was late for something. As though she knew he would be there. Waiting. As though she knew he would come.” (Roy 332)

Though it’s a most modern novel, the description in it gives the taste of older stories where fate was the inevitable instrument that carried a man or woman to their inevitable destiny. Whatever follows carry the same sense of inevitability; of fate and destiny.

“He began to swim towards her. Quietly. Cutting through the water with no fuss As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. . . .

“He stood before her with the river dripping from him. She stayed sitting on the steps, watching him. Her face pale in the moonlight. A sudden chill crept over him. His heart hammered. It was all a terrible mistake. He had misunderstood her. The whole thing was a figment of his imagination. This was a trap. There were people in the bushes. Watching. She was the delectable bait He tried to make his voice casual. Normal. It came out in a croak.

“Ammukutty . . . what is it?”

“She went to him and laid the length of her body against his. He just stood there. He didn’t touch her. He was shivering. Partly with cold. Partly terror. Partly aching desire She put her arms around him.

“He tried to be rational: What’s the worst thing that can happen?

“I could lose everything. My job. My family. My livelihood. Everything.

“She could hear the wild hammering of his heart.

“She held him till it calmed down. Somewhat.

“She unbuttoned her shirt. They stood there. Skin to skin

“Behind them the river pulsed through the darkness, shimmering like wild silk. Yellow bamboo wept.

“Clouded eyes held clouded eyes in a steady gaze and a luminous woman opened herself to a luminous man. She was as wide and deep as a river in space. He sailed on her waters. She could feel him moving deeper and deeper into her. Frantic. Frenzied. Asking to be let in further. Further. Stopped only by the shape of her. The shape of him. And when he was refused, when he had touched the deepest depths of her, with a sobbing, shuddering sigh, he drowned

“Only one thing mattered now. They knew that it was all they could ask of each other. The only thing. Ever. They both knew that.

“Even later, on the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things. . . .

“Each time they parted, they extracted only one small promise from each other.

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow.’

“They knew that things could change in a day. They were right about that.” (Roy 333-339)

While continuing, they linked their fate to a fragile minute spider which lived in a crack in the wall of the verandah. They linked because of its smallness and fragility but to their utter mistake it was found that *Chappu Thamburan*, the spider so named by them, outlived Velutha, fathering future generations and finally dying a natural death.

“The first night, on the day that Sophie Mol came, Velutha watched his lover dress

“Yes, Margaret, she thought. *We do it to each other too.*

“She kissed his closed eyes and stood up. Velutha with his back against the mangosteen tree watched her walk away.

“She had a dry rose in her hair.

“She turned to say it once again: *‘Naaley.’*

‘Tomorrow.’ (Roy 339-340)

Central Theme and its Justification

It is the end of the book though not the story for the story ended earlier. It is a flash back. It is not necessary to tell this end for the project, nor was it essential for the writer to describe such elaborate pornographic scene for even without it the story would stand very well on its ground, as she wrote. But it must also be admitted that the basic acts of mortal man-woman relationship is unveiled here very poetically, stage by stage.

As a sequel to the love between the two undesirable to each other as social beings, children's misadventure into the river, their ways of life and the pent up relationship between the members of the household; all the causes connected to each other led the whole family towards its ruin. It ruined. Everything is connected, invariably. And in the process it is highlighted that the neglected humans are more insignificant than the insignificant creatures like small spiders.

Arundati Roy's revolt against the society in her debut novel, actually her only novel so far, telling us of the family relations reminds us of another senior woman writer who had used her pen variously in several of her novels against the so called established society long before this work took shape, besides the main fight among the Naxalites, the vested interest in a faction of the Indian communist party and the government as in Mahasweta Devi's novel, let us see the summary of family relations in it.

"It was all like a festering, malignant cancer. The dead pretended to live within relationships that were long dead and thus keep up a masquerade of life. Sujata felt that if she went close enough to Amit, Neepa and Balai the stench of carrion would overwhelm her." 2

"It had been in the papers. The news of Sophie Mol's death, of the police 'Encounter' with a Paravan charged with kidnapping and murder. Of the subsequent Communist Party siege of Paradise Pickles and Preserves, led by Ayemenem's own Crusader for justice and Spokesman of the Oppressed. Comrade K.N.M. Pillai claimed that the Management had implicated the Paravan in a false police case because he was an active member of the Communist Party. That they wanted to eliminate him for indulging in 'Lawful Union Activities.'" (Roy 303)

With this piece of news the writer conveys the rationale of the actions of all the parties involved. Velutha dies mortally as the members of the affected family dies to themselves besides the loss of a life by drowning in the river. The Communist Party lives by justifying its selfish and deceitful activity by falsehood. This is exposing the so called proletariat's leaders and their party which Mahasweta Devi did as a pioneer in several of her novels like *Bashai Tudu* and *Mother of 1084*.

We find the behaviour of the police noteworthy in such a situation, the behavior of the comrades in the party who had disowned Velutha when once he sought their help but then did not leave a stone unturned to get the benefit out of his untimely death and out of the fate of the unfortunate children of Ammu which are characteristic of such people. The children were separated; Estha was sent back to his father at Calcutta, Rahel lived ever neglected in her maternal uncle's house and Ammu continued to carry on her wretched life for some time more. The others in the house were bored to death. The house became a symbol of dull drudgery.

The story is highly sarcastic, exposing different people in the context of different social beliefs and practices. Male female distinction, distinction between castes, utter neglect of the caste-less people, clash of interests among people of different groups and difference between idealism and actual behavior, all are laid bare in the story, detailing them with similes and metaphors galore, showing irony of fate and life. When the rationale of actions of everybody and every social institution; police or political party, is questioned, another question arises: Are the actions between the two protagonists of the novel very unjustified and irrational? Why should they die or be condemned to death somehow when all other culprits exist? This being the central theme of the work the writer seems to have justified her strong pleading on behalf of the deprived women. The events of the novel are forceful, pervasive and passionate to establish the central theme of the novelist. She has shown the human value of the outcaste.

The central theme of the story is the love affair between Ammu and Velutha. It is not a love at first sight or real affection grown between the two adult man and woman. Neither aesthetic, pure love nor love for love's sake nor purely physical desire. It is a desperate love of the deprived. Losing all hope of cohabiting with preferable anybody reasonably and honourably in her youth, revolting against the society and revenging against such a love existing side by side between her brother Chacko and his wife Margaret, though that too is a reunion between the two ex-husband and ex-wife at an opportune time, Ammu proves herself as the queen of pathos. The usual physical attraction between the two is there but intensified by a revolt against the society which restricts their behavior leaving no other way of satisfaction of the life's urge. The other party to the love affair is like an insect drawn by the fire. Both become insects in the course of their relationship. Compulsively and obsessively they were drawn to each other, to the essential act of physical union described by the writer; "Despite the fear his body was prepared to take the bait. It wanted her. Urgently. His wetness wet her. She put her arms around him." (Roy 334)

The story of the novel proceeds very fast. It proceeds through all haze and maze, through all turmoil by the force of description, by the force of its cutting and sharp language. Even when it may be said to be pornographic as she has indulged in it at good length, as she has been

charged with it, it carries its own rationale and its lyrical beauty in rhythm as it is found sometimes in the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto. We may mention for example, his short story titled, “Odour”.

Notes:

1. Basu Sankariprashad. *Medieval Poets and Poetry*. Calcutta: General Printers and Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1965; 3rd edition. Paperback. p.84
2. Devi Mahasweta. *Mother of 1084*. Translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay. Calcutta: Seagull. 1998. Paperback. p.116

Work Cited:

Roy Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: IndiaInk Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd. Print. Paperback. 1997