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Can the Children Speak? Narrating Childhood in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*

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Abstract:

Childhood has traditionally been considered as a state of innocence, vulnerability, irrationality and bliss. However, the increased prominence of childhood studies as a theoretical discipline has led to the questioning of such assumptions. Though Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things* is a specimen of adult fiction, the story centres on the experiences of a pair of seven-year-old fraternal twins and much of it is narrated from a child's perspective, in a language replete with a child-like idiom. The paper engages with Roy's novel to explore the representation of childhood as a state of marginality characterized by contraries – innocence and wisdom, kindness and cruelty, pleasure and pain.

Keywords: childhood, adult, marginalized, trauma, agency.

For Arundhati Roy, the charm of childhood lies in its propensity for curiosity, wonder, doubt and unknowingness. Opposed to it, the adult world of men is about knowingness and the authority that comes with it, where power and the awareness of fixed roles and societal expectations can often rob one of one's humanity. She brings out this contrast between childhood and adulthood while commenting on two adult characters, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Matthew:

They were both men whom childhood had abandoned without a trace. Men without curiosity. Without doubt. Both in their own way truly, terrifyingly adult. They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. They worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine. (Roy 262)

Narrating most of the story from a child's perspective, Roy poignantly captures the beauty and charm of childhood and at the same time exposes the brutality and cruelty with

which the voice of children is silenced. Marek Tesar comments on how children's voices have been marginalized by considering them to be 'childish' 'cute' or 'irrational' (5). Children have been stripped of their agency by their portrayal as "passive subjects of adult's influences and ideas" (Tesar 4). They are presented as vulnerable, needing the protection of the rational and all-knowing adult. In the light of this insight, Roy's *The God of Small Things* can be considered an attempt to debunk and dispute traditional depictions of childhood which are didactic in tone and normalize the constructed nature of childhood. The paper focuses on exploring Roy's representation of children as a marginalized and disempowered category, trying to find solidarity with other muted groups like women and untouchables.

Set in rural Kerala, in the village of Ayemenem, *The God of Small Things* centres on the tragic story of Ammu and her fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel. Flitting back and forth between two time-frames, the tragedy is pieced out bit by bit like a jigsaw puzzle. The first period is the late 1960s when the twins are seven-year-olds, while the second period is the early 1990s when the two have become adults. The narrative voice of the first period is child-like and is infused with "vigour and originality" (Pesso-Miquel 177) while the other narrative voice is adult and reflective. Ammu is the divorcee daughter of the wealthy and aristocratic Syrian Christian Ipe family of Ayemenem, forced to return to her parental home after her alcoholic husband tries to pimp her out to his boss. The first part of the novel focuses on the fuss over the arrival of Sophie Mol, the half-British daughter of Ammu's Oxford-educated brother, Chacko, a divorcee himself, and this, in turn, anticipates the tragedy that hinges on two incidents, one scandalous and the other unfortunate; the discovery of the nightly meetings between Ammu and the low-caste untouchable Velutha and the death of Sophie Mol.

As offsprings of a broken "*intercommunity love marriage*" (Roy 45-46) which was frowned upon in the orthodox Syrian Christian community to which their mother belongs, Estha and his sister, Rahel are constantly reminded of their marginalized status. Their grandaunt, Baby Kochamma, is "keen for them to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother's house, where they really had no right to be" (45). They are considered doomed right from the beginning, even before tragedy strikes, for their grandmother thinks that "what her grandchildren suffered from was far worse than Inbreeding. She meant having parents who were divorced." (61) Roy's comment that their mother is exasperated by "their willingness to love people who didn't really love them" (43) goes to show the contrast in people's attitude towards them and their half-British cousin Sophie Mol, who is "Loved from the beginning" (135) by everyone around her. The differential

treatment of the twins and Sophie Mol can be attributed to the politics of race and gender. The father of the twins is Hindu, while Sophie's mother is British. Consequently, the "family of anglophiles" (52) is favourably disposed towards Sophie while her cousins, Rahel and Estha are looked upon as "Half- Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian will ever marry" (45). Moreover, Sophie is the daughter of the son of the family, Chacko, who exercises sole right over the Ayemenem property. At the same time, the twins are the children of Ammu, who has no right over her parental property and, therefore, has no "Locusts Stand I". If Sophie is heartily welcomed and cherished and showered with love and attention, Estha and Rahel are made to feel unwanted repeatedly, their sensitive child-mind confused and hurt over being referred to as 'millstones' by both their uncle and their beloved Ammu. So, Roy does not essentialize childhood, nor does she idealize it, but she paints a vivid and convincing picture of the simple joys, expectations and fears of childhood.

Unwelcome as they are in the house of their maternal grandparents, Rahel and Estha manage to find moments of happiness and fulfilment. They have an uncanny, almost telepathic connection, are each other's greatest strength and are happiest in the company of each other. Little acts give them pleasure: bathing pigs, finding an egg from a hen, or an intimate moment with Ammu counting the silver stretch marks on her stomach. Their mother is the centre of their world and loves them 'Double', but is also a strict disciplinarian. So, the person they are closest to, besides Ammu, is the low-caste paravan, Velutha, who helps around in the Ayemenem House. It is interesting to note that the children should find companionship and solidarity with a member of another muted and marginalized group. After a brief period of sullen hostility that they display towards Sophie Mol, they take her into their fold. The change of heart comes on the heels of Sophie Mol amazing them with her shocking and unexpected rejection and disregard of adult expectations:

She had:

- (a) Informed Chacko that even though he was her Real Father, she loved him less than Joe-...
- (b) Turned down Mammachi's offer that she replace Estha and Rahel as the privileged plaiter of Mammachi's nightly rat's tail and counter of moles.
- (c) (& Most Important) -... rejected outright and extremely rudely, all of Baby Kochamma's advances and seductions. (189)

When the three of them, Estha, Rahel and Sophie Mol, visit Velutha, wearing saris and red bindis on their forehead and introduce themselves to him as Mrs Pillai, Mrs Eappen and Mrs Rajagopalan, Velutha instinctively participates in their act of make-believe and treats them with the utmost courtesy even introducing them to his paralyzed brother as well as his surly hen. His patience and affection for the children is what endears him to them. Later, the adult Rahel recognizes the sweetness of his gesture: "A grown man... colluding in the conspiracy of their fiction, taking care not to decimate it with adult carelessness." (190) So, in a world where children are silenced, intimidated and not taken seriously, this act of Velutha can be seen as an indication of an attempt at narrowing the gap between children and adults.

Apart from their moments with Velutha and Ammu, Estha and Rahel are neglected, resented and stigmatized. Baby Kochamma grudges them even their moments of simple joys. "But most of all she grudged them the comfort they drew from each other. She expected from them some token unhappiness. At the very least" (46). As if it were a fulfilment of her wish, the lives of the twins and their mother are entirely destroyed after the storm that strikes in the form of the forbidden love affair between Ammu, a high caste Syrian Christian and Velutha, a low-caste paravan. In an essay on childhood studies Crawford & Lewis quote Sir Keith Thomas's apt observation, "Children like women, are what anthropologists like to call a muted group" (10). Ammu is a divorced woman living in her parents' house who lacks the educational qualifications of her brother and has no legal right over her parental property. Therefore, she is triply marginalized. Coming from a family of paravans who are untouchables, Velutha's marginalization is more profound. So, we have a coming together of three muted groups that have been othered by society, and the boat, found by Rahel, mended by Velutha and used by Ammu and her children, becomes a symbol of their connection and comradeship. While exploring the reckless aspect of Ammu's character, Roy comments: "It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day. To use by night the boat that her children used by day. The boat that Estha sat on and Rahel found" (Roy 44).

The discord in Ammu's marriage has left her children with unpleasant memories. They remember "being pushed around a room once, from Ammu to Baba to Ammu to Baba like billiard balls. Ammu pushing Estha away. Here, you keep one of them. I can't look after them both" (84). So, they have been made to feel unwanted and unprotected, even in their own father's house. Though Ammu says that in anger and does not mean it, the damage has been done. The vulnerability of a child is brought to focus in the episode with the "Orangedrink Lemondrink Man" (101), who sexually abuses Estha:

‘Now if you’ll kindly hold this for me,’ the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man said, handing Estha his penis through his soft white muslin dhoti, “I’ll get you your drink. Orange? Lemon?” ...The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man’s hand closed over Estha’s. His thumbnail was long like a woman’s. He moved Estha’s hand up and down. First slowly. Then fastly. (103)

This unfortunate incident marks the beginning of Estha’s undoing. As he returns to the Cinema Hall, he feels dirty and polluted: “Oh Captain von Trapp, ... Could you love the little fellow with the orange...He’s just held the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man’s soo-soo in his hand, but could you love him still?” (106) To add to his misery, his abuser threatens Estha that he can always come and get him because he knows where he lives. This fear haunts Estha all the time, and it is precisely because of this that he concludes that “(a)Anything can happen to anyone. And (b) It’s best to be prepared” (194). This, in turn, leads to tragic consequences.

It is the search for a safe haven which is out of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man’s reach that leads Estha to the History House. While talking about spaces for children, Louise Chawla states:

[T]here is also a need for undefined space where young people can formulate their own worlds: for free space where [children] can manipulate the environment and play ‘Let’s pretend’ ...; for hide-outs ... where ... children can practise independence... and for private refuges (69).

The History House provides this kind of space to Estha. He makes a plan called the Red Agenda with Rahel which entails stealing away to the History House while Ammu is taking her afternoon nap. They decide to call each other Comrades, as if to align themselves with Velutha who is a communist. The appeal of the History House is its remoteness from adults because Estha no longer feels secure in the presence of adults. While making the banana jam in the factory, Estha realizes that the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man could just walk in through the door, and Ammu would serve him juice. Estha’s inability to share his traumatic experience with his mother, who is blissfully unaware of what the man has done to her son and converses politely with him, calling him a sweet chap, makes Estha think that Ammu would never believe him and that somehow, she would side with the fellow adult. Therefore, he makes frantic plans

to establish a home away from home. Besides the abandoned faraway place of refuge, another place which offers security and liberty to Estha is Velutha's house. While singing raucously along with Rahel and Kuttappen, Velutha's paralyzed brother, in Velutha's hut, his fears vanish: "Temporarily, for a few happy moments, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man shut his yellow smile and went away. Fear sank and settled at the bottom of the deep river" (Roy 212). When the twins are in the company of Velutha or his brother, the boundaries between adulthood and childhood seem to collapse.

The theme of punishment received for breaking laws looms large in the novel. After being chided by Ammu for speaking thoughtlessly and being told that such an action makes "people love you a little less" (112), Rahel expresses her wish to exchange her punishment: "No dinner in exchange for Ammu loving her the same as before" (114). Even as a seven-year-old, she is aware that wrongdoing of any kind cannot go unpunished, and she is willing to trade a punishment that entails alienating herself from her mother for one that would cause her bodily discomfort. Little does she know at that moment, that a much bigger punishment awaits the family of three that will tear them asunder: "While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws" (55). Ammu breaks the love laws by loving a man who is beneath her in terms of caste and class. Her twins run away from home taking along with them their cousin, Sophie Mol who does not want to be left behind. For Estha, who has already lost his faith in adults and is struggling to cope with the trauma of sexual abuse, it is the final nail in the coffin, when Ammu screams at him and Rahel for being the millstones around her neck and asks them to leave her alone. It is indeed a great tragedy that Sophie Mol drowns in the river when the boat carrying the three children turns over. And it is most cruel that Estha and Rahel should not only be blamed for it but also be made to pay a price. "Baby Kochamma would say it was a Small Price to pay. Was it? Two lives. Two children's childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders" (336). The twins are tricked into giving a false testimony to implicate Velutha and save the name and honour of the Ipe family, by the shrewd and manipulative Baby Kochamma. After the Kottayam Police discover Velutha's innocence and realize that the F.I.R. lodged against him with the allegation of kidnapping and rape was fake, they threaten Baby Kochamma: "The matter is very simple. Either the rape victim must file a complaint. Or the children must identify the Paravan as their abductor in the presence of a police witness....Or I must charge you with lodging a false F.I.R. Criminal offence." (314-315) This is how Estha comes to be saddled with the burden of guilt, the guilt of identifying his beloved Velutha as his

abductor: “The inspector asked his question. Estha’s mouth said Yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt” (320). The burden of guilt and the trauma of separation silence Estha forever. Estha’s fate is a poignant example of the gross insensitivity and cruelty of authority, represented by adults, towards those who lack power and agency. It is Baby Kochamma’s idea that Ammu should no longer be allowed to stay in the Ayemenem house and that the twins should be separated. While Rahel could stay in Ayemenem, Estha should be returned to their father. Thus, Ammu, her two children and Velutha, bonded as much by love as by their voicelessness and disempowered status, find themselves being brutally punished by the power structures- Ammu and Velutha for daring to challenge societal norms, Estha and Rahel for transgressing the boundaries drawn for children.

The ‘two-egg twins’ who are separated after consulting a Twin Expert according to whom their separation would only cause “the natural distress that children from broken homes underwent” (32) are inseparable. Apart from the fact that they complement and complete each other and can even read each other’s thoughts, they have no one else to fall back on. Consequently, their forced separation has devastating repercussions on their childhood as well as adult life. It creates an unfathomable void in Rahel while Estha stops talking altogether. The look in Rahel’s eyes that offends her ex-husband “was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism. And a hollow where Estha’s words had been. He couldn’t be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other” (19-20). While Estha has to bear the trauma of being uprooted and separated from his mother and sister, Rahel has to deal with the pain of having to watch her mother slowly lose her beauty and turn into a sickly woman coughing up phlegm. When Ammu dies a miserable and lonely death, the Syrian Church refuses her a decent burial. So, Rahel has only Chacko by her side as her mother’s body is fed into the furnace at the crematorium. The extreme callousness and unkindness, displayed by the members of her immediate family and the Syrian community at large, seem to numb Rahel’s feelings forever. She drifts from one school to another and throughout the rest of her life. The author comments that her guardians at Ayemenem “provided the care (food, clothes, fees), but withdrew the concern” (15). The psychological scars of childhood haunt Estha deeply as he punishes himself for lying to the police and stops talking altogether. The image of Velutha’s disfigured face stays with him forever:

The memory of a swollen face and a smashed, upside-down smile. Of a spreading pool
of clear liquid with a bare bulb reflected in it. Of a bloodshot eye that had opened,

wandered and then fixed its gaze on him. Estha. And what had Estha done? He had looked into that beloved face and said: Yes. (32)

Moreover, by the time Rahel and Estha realise that they are the victims and not the perpetrators as they were made to believe, it is too late. Thus, Roy's novel hauntingly brings to light how children can be silenced, intimidated and decimated and how that, in turn, can affect their lives. The twins reunite after Estha is 're-Returned' (9) to Ayemenem by his father, and they try to re-establish the connection that they had with each other by breaking the 'love laws' once again. But they are hardly able to recover from the enduring damage caused by the trauma of their past, for "what they shared that night was not happiness but hideous grief" (328). Elizabeth Outka comments "The scene offers a twisted, traumatic recovery, recovery in the sense of return, a relentless replay of previous moments and times without any expectation that these might be left behind or escaped" (21).

Despite *The God of Small Things* being a story of the victimhood of children, Roy seeks to invest the child with agency and maturity beyond his or her years. While Ammu fails to see through the fake sweetness of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, Rahel hates him at first sight and is irritated when her mother calls him a 'sweet chap' (Roy 111). Therefore, children seem to have better instincts than adults. Rahel and Estha show maturity beyond their years. On one occasion, while they are in a playful mood with Ammu, counting her silver stretch marks, Rahel casually asks her if she thinks their Baba might have lost their address. Roy comments, "Just the hint of a pause in the rhythm of Ammu's breathing made Estha touch Rahel's middle finger with his. And middle finger to middle finger..... they abandoned that line of questioning" (221). When they accompany Ammu to the Police Station, they witness how Inspector Thomas Matthew treats her. He taps her breasts with his baton and tells her that they do not take statements from "veshyas or their illegitimate children" (8). They board a bus on their way back to Ayemenem, and because their mother is crying, they do not ask her the meaning of 'veshya' or 'illegitimate'. Estha instinctively assumes the role of the guardian: "He took the money out of Ammu's purse. The conductor gave him the tickets. Estha folded them carefully and put them in his pocket. Then he put his little arms around his rigid, weeping mother" (9). The degree of maturity and sensitivity displayed by both Rahel and Estha on these occasions is commendable. Another significant way the children are given agency is through their narrative voice. They also devise their own ways of coping with the tragic circumstances. Rahel is quick to take refuge in the world of fiction after she is witness to the beating of Velutha at

the History House. Not wanting to believe what she has witnessed, she says, “It’s his twin brother Urumban from Kochi” (311). Later, Estha corroborates this view:

“You were right. It wasn’t him. It was Urumban.”

“Thank god,” Rahel whispered back.

“Where d’you think he is?”

“Escaped to Africa.” (320)

Roy paints childhood with an extremely delicate and sensitive brush, teasing out the nuances of their experience at the intersections of an adult web of power structures along the lines of caste, class, gender and colonized mindsets. Through her use of a child-like language, she makes us inhabit the world of children, rejoicing in their joys and grieving with them in their loss and sorrow. The story presents a haunting picture of the fragility of moments of childhood bliss and gratification amidst the vulnerabilities and precarities associated with childhood.

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