



Indigenous Identity in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract— *The novel The God of Small Things (1996) by Arundhati Roy has been defined by Salman Rushdie as a novel that has been written artistically well. It is a very ambitious novel and the style is quite personal. By using her ambition and personal style Roy challenges indigenous issues and hybridity effortlessly. Through these two subjects we are acquainted with the themes of identity, culture, human relationship, and politics. This paper argues that The God of Small Things exchanges, questions and experiments with identity through symbols that signify identity: language, politics, culture and human relationship. Roy is very observant in presenting her narrative; but she hides her judgment, and leaves us to make our own conclusions. The representation of the characters' social class is examined using definition of social class and maintained by aspects of social class. The influence of the characters' social class is studied using the consequences concept of social class. The main characters' social class is represented through several points.*

Keywords— *Indigenous, identity, social class, hybridity, culture, language.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The God of Small Things portrayed the life of Indian society. The setting of the story takes place in Kerala. The main characters in this novel are Estha and Rahel. They are twins and their grandfather belongs to a wealthy, land-owning, Syrian Christian Ipe family of Aymenem, a town in Kerala. The characters in the novel are divided into two classes. The characters of the upper class are Pappachi, Mammachi, Chacko, BabyKochama. And the lower class's characters are Ammu, Velutha, rahel and Estha. The social class of the characters can be identified by their economic background, their way of dressing, and the standard of living. Here, Ammu, Rahel and Estha are Upper social class but due to some problems, their social class is changed from Upper social class to Lower social class and it also makes different impression on them.

The term Hybridity that is prevalent in the novel is not a new concept, although it is a term that is widely used by recent colonial and postcolonial theories like Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha. A hybrid is viewed as a cross between two different species. Young explains hybridity as:

At its simplest, hybridity...implies a disruption and forcing together of any unlike living things... Hybridity is a making one of two different things so that it becomes impossible for the eye to detect the hybridity of a geranium or a rose (Young 1995: 26).

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy experiments with different types of hybridity as she presents hybridity along with the form of language, race, religion, politics and culture. Roy's experiment with language is mostly done through the two main characters — the twins, Estha and Rahel. The narrative places them in a Malayalam speaking society, but their education is in preparation of turning them into hybrids. They are reading Shakespeare and Kipling by age six, and they are taught to speak perfect English by their family:

That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. English, I will always speak in English. A hundred time each (36).

Since the twins are trained to use English properly and in its purest form, without code switching or code mixing. However they manage to hybridize the language by generating their own from of English. One such example is of the twins reading backwards:

The red sign on the red and white arm said STOP in white. Rahel said. A yellow hoarding said BE INDIAN in red. 'NAIDI YUB, NAIDINI EB,' Estha said (59).

There are many examples in the novel where Roy plays with language and breaks language rules. For instance, the word nevertheless, becomes: 'Never. The. Less' (55).

Most of her experiments with language are done by way of the twins as they read and speak backwards and coin words together to form new words. Roy creates for them their own world where adults are not allowed entrance. Roy writes in Indian-English, and thus, gives the language her literary voice and her distinct style, because she is Indian. Her experimentation with language can also be interpreted as her experimentation with identity – the Indian identity. In the novel, language is a way that is used to form identities and she negotiates with it. Indigenization is a term used to denote the process that has turned someone into the native of the land. According to Sinha, "...indigenization would imply the way in which an element is so transformed as to make it nature or suited to the region, to the soil or the special features of the environment...or the sociocultural setting" (1993: 34). The phase where the "indigenization of psychology in India can be characterized as one of questioning, doubt, and a search for new identity" was visible in the mid 1960's and the 1970's (Sinha, 1993: 33). The process of indigenization was clearly evident during this phase and this was clearly shown by the "urge to develop a psychology rooted in India soil" (Sinha, 1993: 34). Sinha also claims that the indigenized subject is not the complete product, but the one that is going through the process of indigenization. According to him, "...indigenization is visible in the shaping of a process rather than in a finished product" (Sinha, 1993: 34). Indigenous communities must be well-defined. According to Jose R. Martinez Cobo, Indigenous peoples, communities and nations are those which, having a historical continuousness with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that established on their territories, consider themselves different from other sectors of the societies now dominant on those territories, or parts

of them. At present they form the non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, improve and communicate to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence. Therefore, if we take Sinha's theory of indigenization and Cobo's definition of indigenous communities into contemplation, the indigenized people are those that exercise the culture of the land and whose children inherit it from them.

It is clear that Arundhati Roy inquires identity and negotiates with it and in her negotiations she takes her writing a step further. She does not only hybridize her language but also attempts to indigenize her narrative as well. According to Sinha, "...indigenization would imply the way in which an element is so transformed as to make it nature or suited to the region, to the soil or the special features of the environment...or the sociocultural setting" (1993: 34).

Since the form and the language that Roy has used to write are foreign. So in order to make it local she interlaces English with Malayalam words. She presents the indigenous element of the language in the names that she uses. For instance: "Mammachi" for grandmother, "Pappachi" for grandfather and "Ammu" for mother. Words like "Ayyo Kashtam" (p.177) and "Sundarikutty" (p. 179) are only a few examples of Malayalam words that exist in the text. Arundhati Roy wrote *The God of Small Things* predominately in English; But, she includes a number of words in Malayalam, thus making the reader work for some of the most relevant information in the novel.

The history of the Malayalam language hints at the author's use of two languages in the novel. Vipin Gopal asserts, "Malayalis have always welcomed other languages to coexist with their own and the interaction of these with Malayalam has helped its development in different respects" (Malayalam 1). Although Malayalam is mainly of Sanskrit origin, English is the second largest language spoken by Indians in Kerala in the southern region of the country. By using both English and Malayalam Roy demonstrates what her native tongue has been doing for thousands of years: synchronizing with other languages without losing its own influence.

The effect of combining a bit of Malayalam in the English text is something that even Roy cannot sufficiently characterize: "All I can say about that is language is the skin on my thought. My language is something that I find hard to analyze and dissect. It's the way I think. I have no answers to questions about it". (qtd. in Abraham, 91) Although the author gives no explanation for her stylistic choices anywhere, the reader must accept that each

capitalized, misspelled, or italicized word conveys meaning for the character. By evaluating the words as the characters use them, rather than as Roy might use them, permits the reader to more fully comprehend the motives and feelings of the characters, especially the twins Estha and Rahel. Although Roy does not comment on specific linguistic choices, she does assert that there is a method to her writing:

It was really like designing a building...the use of time, the repetition of words and ideas and feelings. It was really a search for coherence—design coherence—in the way that every last detail of a building—its doors and windows, its structural components—have, or at least ought to have, an aesthetic, stylistic integrity, a clear indication that they belong to each other, as must a book. (qtd. in Abraham 9091)

We may even consider Roy's language to function as a bricolage (a piece created from diverse resources, of whatever materials are at hand). This style that Roy employs reveals that the text was not written with only foreign readers in mind although in her book *Orientalism from Within*:

Arundhati Roy and Her Contemporaries, Halimah Mohamed Ali (2011), argues that Roy's project is to cater and pander to the West. Nevertheless, Mohamed Ali's arguments can be taken further to support the idea that Roy might be pandering and catering to her Western audience via the local language that she uses since it may enhance the idea of the exotic Other. (12)

The setting of the novel also adds to its indigenous characteristics. It is set in Ayemenem, a town in the state of Kerala in India. The novel can be read as an expressive work because of the indigenous elements and its form as a quasi-autobiography. The presentation of the caste system in the text also adds to its indigenous features. The caste system is traditionally Hindu as also viewed by scholars like Harold A. Gould (1987) and Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948). Since, it was Aryan who brought the caste system to India in about 150 BC. However it is still practiced in modern India in the form that is almost as intact as it was first introduced though political intervention has outlawed it. Untouchability, which is one of the themes that Roy portrays, is a branch of the caste system and these are those people who do not come under the four castes in Hinduism: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. Despite the abolishment of discrimination based on caste, religion and gender by the Indian Constitution, it has not been eliminated. In fact *The God of Small Things* is a critique of this evil that is apparent in Indian society. Roy's criticism is based on the claim that though laws have been framed, and changes have been made, the spirit

of the Indian society's attitude towards untouchability has not changed. In the novel she represents a sexual relationship between an Untouchable man (Velutha) and a Syrian-Christian woman (Ammu) who belongs to the higher caste according to the Indian society. Roy's move is very daring because she declared close physical contact or relationship between untouchables and Indians of the higher caste:

Correspondents have asked whether inter-dining and inter-marriage are part of the movement against untouchability... I should never dream of making this reform, however desirable in itself it may be, part of an all-India reform which has been long overdue... It may even amount to a breach of faith with the masses to call upon them suddenly to view the removal of untouchability in a light different from what they have been thought to believe it to be (Green, 1987, 195).

Roy is more audacious in her quest to change the social customs of her society. Velutha dies in police custody a few days after their affair becomes openly known, and after few years Ammu dies alone in a rented room in Allepey, far away from her two children. It seems Roy has punished the couple for their illicit inter-caste relationship. However, killing both lovers is her strategy of rescuing herself from criticism and the rage of the Indian society, because the issue that she has undertaken is very sensitive. Although she tries to be the cause of change, but her writing only suggests change in the Indian society's views regarding untouchability, it does not strongly advocate improvement.

Roy's caution is due to the fact that Untouchability has been ingrained in the Indian society for centuries. It is not only synonymous to Hinduism, but it is identical to India as well. It identifies the Indians and their country. That is why though the society that the narrative presents is a Christian society the caste system is still applicable to it. Even the Untouchable characters are Christians:

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Palavans, Palayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability... It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were given their own separate Pariah Bishop (74).

The argument that the narrative creates is that religions may change but the Indians' view of the Untouchables continue to be the same. Although Christianity preaches equality among humans, but in India it has become a hybrid religion. It embraces the caste system as one of its

unexpected doctrines. This case is very much relevant to the Syrian Christians in the novel who believe that they are “descendants of one hundred Brahmins whom Saint Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he travelled east after the Resurrection” (66). Roy’s argues that, to maintain the caste system, the Indian society will even take refuge in legends.

Moreover, the caste system is employed in *The God of Small Things* to criticize politics and politicians and the political system that Roy criticizes is Marxism. She argues that although Marxism is built upon the notion of equality for all, but in India it is not able to stand up to the caste system, because politicians like K.N.M. Pillai have their own plan. The Marxist leader in the novel who is a Brahmin is more careful of his caste and political desire than his duties toward his fellow member Velutha:

The only snag in Comrade K.N.M. Pillai’s plans was Velutha. Of all the workers at Paradise Pickles, he was the only card-holding member of the Party, and that gave Comrade Pillai an ally he would have rather done without. He knew that all the other Touchable workers in the factory resented Velutha for ancient reasons of their own. Comrade Pillai stepped carefully round this wrinkle, waiting for a suitable opportunity to iron it out (121)

And it is this ambition that influences Chacko, Velutha’s boss to terminate him from the pickle factory:

The Paravan is going to cause trouble for you...Take it from me... get him a job somewhere else. Sent him off... He may be very well okay as a person. But other workers are not happy with him. Already they are coming to me with complaints...You see, from local standpoint, these caste issues are very deep-rooted. (278)

Even when Velutha asks Pillai for help after he is embarrassed and threatened by Mammachi (Ammu’s mother), Pillai turns him down by saying that “But Comrade, you should know that Party was not constituted to support workers’ indiscipline in their private life” (28). The narrative points out the failure to us: “And there it was again. Another religion turned against itself. Another edifice constructed by the human mind, decimated by human nature” (287). The idea that holds all men as equal has no room in India. It is an ideal that shall never be endorsed because of the caste system. The caste system did not expire even in the name of religion – Christianity – that is thought to embrace all men as equals. Thus a belief as new as communism too does not have the power to change a culture that has been integral for centuries. So, the communism that exists in India is only a hybrid communism, which makes allowances for the caste system. It does not exist on the basis of equality for all.

II. CONCLUSION

The God of Small Things is a novel that interlaces the themes of identity successfully within greater subjects that is hybridity and indigenous issues. It gives challenging views about hybridity. Roy does not offer a solution for us as to whether we should accept hybridity or reject it. *The God of Small Things* is a postcolonial novel that debates the identity and locality of a hybrid postcolonial society that is indigenous to its environment. *The God of Small Things* negotiates and experiments with identity through symbols that signify identity: language, culture, politics and human relationship

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