



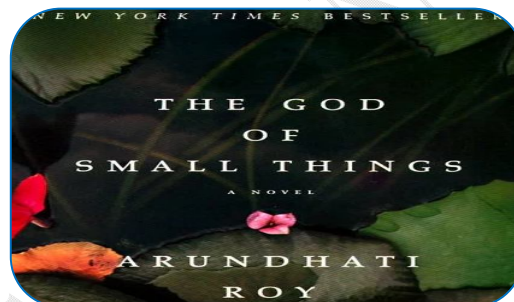
## THREE-FOLD OPPRESSION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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### ABSTRACT :

*The God of Small Things* is the story of three generations of a Kerala Christian family, the patriarch Pappachi and his submissive but yet strong wife-Mammachi, their son Chacko with a divorced English wife Margaret and his daughter Sophie, their daughter Ammu a divorced daughter from an inter-community marriage and who is now back to live with her parents along with her son Estha and his 'dizygotic twin' Rahel who didn't know how to be a girl Rahel's grand-aunt Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria etc. Past and present are aesthetically interwoven into the story-line to reveal a multi-layered scheme and various kinds and levels of oppression. It is oppression, which is the main theme or central idea which makes everything in the novel converge. It seems to be the unifying factor in the organisation of the entire novel. It is what Flaubert calls "the mother-idea".



*The oppression meted out can be analysed as a three-fold one: racial (colonial), economic (and political), and sexual (gender-related). The oppression is often overt but occasionally covert too.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Small Things , central idea , Kerala Christian family.*

### INTRODUCTION

*The God of Small Things* is the story of three generations of a Kerala Christian family, the patriarch Pappachi (a wife-beater at home though work he is a recognised Entomologist) and his submissive but yet strong wife-Mammachi, their son Chacko with a divorced English wife Margaret and his daughter Sophie, their daughter Ammu "a divorced daughter from an inter-community marriage" (GOST 45) and who is now back to live with her parents along with her son Estha in whom silence and quietness:

*sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of his skull, hovering the knolls and dells of his memory, dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue. It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. (GOST 12)*

and his 'dizygotic twin' Rahel "who didn't know how to be a girl"(GOST 17), Rahel's grand-aunt Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria etc. Past and present are aesthetically interwoven into the story-line to reveal a multi-layered scheme and various kinds and levels of oppression. It is oppression, which is the main theme or central idea which makes everything in the novel converge. It seems to be the unifying factor in the organisation of the entire novel. It is what Flaubert calls "the mother-idea".

The oppression meted out can be analysed as a three-fold one: racial (colonial), economic (and political), and sexual (gender-related). The oppression is often overt but occasionally covert too. On one hand, we have the male suppression of the female-Pappachi over Mammachi, Ammu's husband over Ammu, Chacko over Ammu, Chacko over the girls at his factory etc. The second one is the economic exploitation of Velutha-the proletariat representative-by the bourgeois Mr. Pillai or Chacko or even the

legal machinery of the State. Not so obvious but running throughout the novel is the racial, colonial, supercilious attitude of Pappachi's boss or Margaret or Sophie Mol and Mr. Hollick and the submissive attitude towards these representatives of the colonisers by the colonised like Pappachi "*an incurable British CCP ... chi-chi poach*" (GOST 51), Ammu's husband, Chacko, Rahel and Estha, Kochu Maria, Baby Kochamma and even Mammachi. According to Chacko, they were a family of Anglophiles. The novel reflects the social realities in a convincing and aesthetic manner. Though women's life and realities are necessarily,

*shaped by multiple social hierarchies that include gender as well as class, ethnicity, religions, age, race and so on, it does not automatically follow that an analysis of gender will necessarily include an analysis of class and other social divisions. (Pereira 77)*

Hence, it is essential that special attention be paid to the condition of women. Women have been portrayed here by Roy as objects of oppression and subjugation, domestic violence and discrimination, societal pressures and prejudices. Mammachi, mother of Chacko and Ammu, is married to an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute who "*every night beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency ...*" (GOST 47). When Mammachi started making pickles commercially and successfully, Pappachi resented the attention that she was getting:

*Though Mammachi had conical corneas and was already practically blind, Pappachi would not help her with the pickle-making, because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high-ranking ex-Government official. (GOST 47)*

As he was a jealous man, he could not tolerate the attention that his wife was now getting and it took Chacko's determined warning to stop Pappachi from battering Mammachi ever again: "*I never want this to happen ever again .... Ever*" (GOST 48). From that day it seemed as if Chacko became the man in Mammachi's life. Roy indicts the societal conditions which make it impossible for a woman to be really independent at any age. She "*packed her wifely baggage and committed it to Chacko's care. From then on he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love*" (GOST 168). Hence, even when she is aware of his libertine relationships with the women in the factory, she overlooks it and in fact encourages him by saying, "*He can't help having a Man's Needs*" (GOST 168). Mammachi is partial to Chacko and his needs but never imagines that Ammu too could have the same needs. Ironically, the male domination over Mammachi continues even after the death of Pappachi as Chacko quietly but firmly takes over the pickle factory. "*Chacko had it registered as a partnership and informed Mammachi that she was the sleeping partner*" (GOST 57).

In spite of all the brouhaha about human rights, the demand for equal status for women, the modernist and post-modernist ways of thought, there continues to be a deep-rooted pattern of discrimination against women both within the family and by society in general. It is so deeply rooted in the system that it is rarely questioned and generally accepted by everybody. We can observe that the victimisation of Ammu operates at various levels. Married to an assistant manager of a tea estate who had a "*juvenile but totally disarming sense of humour*" (GOST 39), she moved to Assam where she became the toast of the Planter's Club and then realized that her husband lied outrageously even when there was no need to. He was "*not just a heavy drinker but a full-blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic's deviousness and tragic charm*" (GOST 40). When his boss Mr. Hollick proposed that Ammu should be senna him to be looked after, she realized that her husband could not and would not look after her. The oppression here operates at two levels-sexual as well as racial. "*When his bouts of violence began to include the children ... Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem*" (GOST 42). The fate of a divorced daughter at her parent's home is far from enviable. When Chacko had returned from England, divorced from his wife, "*Mammae hi joyfully welcomed him back into her life*" (GOST 248). He needed his mother's adoration, "*he demanded it, yet he despised her for it and punished her in secret ways*" (GOST 248). It is obvious that even a woman operates according to patriarchal norms in her dealings with another woman, specially when the second woman is weaker. Chacko takes on himself the mantle of the head of the family and makes Ammu and her children feel like parasites very often. As he says very clearly, "*What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine*" (GOST 57). As a male, he feels he has the right to take over even his mother's pickle factory:

*Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as my factory, my pineapples, my pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property. Chacko told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no Locusts Stand 1. (GOST 57)*

Roy is able to present realistically the feelings of these victims of various levels of oppression and this is an artistic challenge that she is able to overcome convincingly. When Ammu's relationship with Velutha is revealed to Mammachi by Vellya Papen, Mammachi's rage at the revelation quickly turns to cold contempt for her daughter:

*Her tolerance of 'Men's Needs' as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. She had defiled generations of breeding ... For generation to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals. At baptisms and birthday parties. They'd nudge and whisper. It was all finished now. (GOST 258)*

The gender bias even in the minds of women in a clearly defined patriarchal society becomes very evident in such reactions. And so, Ammu is tricked into her bedroom and locked up there. Intriguingly, the helpless situation into which she is thrust does not kill her spirit and she goes to the police station to clarify Velutha's innocence. The Inspector at the police station *"seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't"* (GOST 8). He treats Ammu with scant respect and contemptuously tells her *"that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from Veshyas or their illegitimate children"* (GOST 8). The patriarchal, societal norms give precedence to brutal male power and Inspector Matthew epitomises this: *"Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap, tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered"* (GOST 8). The helpless Ammu and her children have no chance to protest or protect themselves. Chacko's grief at the loss of his daughter is played upon and Ammu finds herself forced to pack up her bags and leave. Ammu's end is as pathetic as her life had been:

*Ammu died in a grimy room in the Sharat Lodge in Alleppey, where she had gone for a job interview as someone's secretary. She died alone. With a noisy ceiling fan for company and no Estha to lie at the back of her and talk to her. She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age. (GOST 161)*

This strand of oppression haunts Rahel too. As a child Rahel is neglected, and though Ammu tries to shower her affection on both her children, the rest of the family makes it clear how unwanted they are. They were tolerated but never loved. Even after Ammu's death, Chacko and Mammachi *"provided the care but withdrew the concern"* (GOST 15). Hence Rahel drifts through life-school, college, marriage and divorce. And then, when Estha was *"re-Returned, Rahel gave up her job at the gas station and left America gladly. To return to Ayemenem. To Estha in the rain"* (GOST 20).

The second strand of oppression that runs through the novel is on the social (caste) and economic level. Velutha is a worker who belongs to a so-called lower caste. In Kerala, Communism came as *"a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiced with a shot of democracy"* (GOST 67). Velutha was a Paravan an untouchable, as Roy reminds us time and again. Mammachi hires him as a factory carpenter, though this leads to a great deal of resentment among the other workers because *"Paravans were not meant to be carpenters"* (GOST 77). He was not allowed to enter Mammachi's house but Mammachi felt that being hired as a carpenter was by itself *"a big step for a Paravan"* (GOST 77). When Vellya Paapen tells Mammachi about his son and her daughter, she reacts violently because Velutha is a Paravan. We can see that as a Paravan Velutha is a victim of society, of specific perverted social values and of socio-political biases. Even though caste is considered to be an inalienable part only of Hindu society, Roy presents it as equally deeply rooted in the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. Baby Kochamma considers herself *"a ship of goodness ploughing through a sea of sin"* (GOST 257) and complains at the Kottayam Police Station against Velutha. Inspector Thomas Mathew too is a representative of the same class and caste because *"He had a Touchable wife, two Touchable daughters- whole Touchable generations waiting in their Touchable wombs"* (GOST 259). Hence his reaction is that of a Touchable who immediately jumps to the conclusion that the Untouchable is in the wrong and should be punished. At this juncture, Roy increases the pathos of the situation by

combining the victimisation of Velutha as a Para van with that of Velutha as a worker. Comrade K. N. Pillai, who clair"; to be a Communist and a party cardholder, and Chacko, who was a self-proclaimed Marxist, exhibit a total lack of concern at the plight of Velutha. The two centre ... of power-the political party and the law machinery-fail to provide any protection for the down-trodden in their time of need. They exhibit no feeling for the common man and seem insensitive to their pain and suffering, sorrow and deprivation:

*The two men (Mathew and Pillai) had a conversation. Brief, cryptic, to the point. As though they had exchanged numbers and not words. No explanations seemed necessary. They were not friends ... and they didn't trust each other. But they understood each other perfectly" 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. (GOST 262)*

Hence, Velutha pays the price for being a Paravan in a society which respects only the Touchables, for being poor in a society which obeys only the dictates of the rich, for being a mere worker and not a party leader like K.N.Pillai.

The third level of oppression is a more covert one-the racial, colonial one of the white, ruler race over the brown, colonised race. In *The God of Small Things*, it one rates more on the level of the colonised bending over backwards please the ex-ruler's race. Pappachi, with his well-pressed suit and gold pocket watch, "was an incurable British CCP, which was "hort for chi-chi poach and in Hindi meant shit-wiper. Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was Anglophile"(GOST 51-52). Chacko seems to believe that he was honoured by a visit from his ex-wife merely because she was British. He considers Sophie to be superior to Rahel and Estha on account of the same reason: "He hugged her and hugged her and hugged her. He kissed her blue grey blue eyes, her entomologist's nose, her hatted redbrown hair" (GOST147). Ammu too is involuntarily drawn into this racial submission and subservience. The slibaltem mindset makes her hope for "a smooth performance. A prize for her children in the Indo-British Behaviour Competition" (GOST 145). Mammachi and Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria treat Margaret and Sophie Molas if they were royalty. Another clear instance of the colonial hangover is seen in the attitude of Mr. Hollick towards Ammu. He imagines that she would be willing to stay with him in return for her husband not being dismissed. "Already there were a number of ragged, lightskinned children on the estate that Hollick had bequeathed on tea-pickers whom he fancied. This was his first incursion into management circles (GOST 42)". Roy adopts a technique of fiction writing which organically blends with the theme of her novel. As Henry James had remarked " ... the idea and form and needle and thread and neither can have any use without the other" (517).

Interestingly, *The God of Small Things* deals with the victimization of the marginalized in a very unique way. Not all the victims are part of the same social class or caste or group. Ammu is a woman but not an untouchable or economically week. The same is true of Mammachi. Velutha is a male in the patriarchal system and hence above the female but he is an untouchable and belongs to the economically weaker section of society. Chacko is an upper-caste, upper-class male but yet subservient to the colonizer. All these levels and kinds of oppression and victimization operate simultaneously and continually. The theme of victimisation is the binding factor which makes. *The God of Small Things* a unified work of art and an artistic achievement.

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