

# Arundhati Roy: The God of Small Things

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September 28, 2006

When trying to decipher the content of a literary work, the most useful piece of information usually comes from its name. *The God of Small Things*—what could it mean? I found the same use of this God-related names in the book *The Place of the Skull* by CHINGIZ AITMATOV and surely there are many other similar books to look into. The word *God* relates closely to the word *Meaning*. Thus I assume—together with the other indications, such as on p. 320

Even later, on thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside.

—that by Small Things is meant the ordinary life derived from our biological and social background. The author asks justly: Where are the Big Things?

When we substitute the word Meaning for God, we will get The Meaning of Small Things. I interpret this as a desperate cry after understanding that in our lives we are always to stick to these little thoughts.

On the other hand, as my friend NICHOLAS BENE noted, we can look into the book as a picture of social issues in India. In this sense we get a grotesque image, in which The Small Things represent a normal family life. The Big Things point to the Government.

The chosen passages emphasize a different aspect of the book: how a family

influences the life of an individual. How society changes him through its laws (this can be best understood by reading p. 92). On p. 32 we read

[...] it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made.  
That laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how  
much.

Here the author obviously refers to the Hindu tradition of castes. Rahel and Estha, two children, on whom most narration concentrates, can be rightfully called the heroes of the book. Their mother Ammu behaves to them as a machine. Love lost its essence of a feeling and became an additive and subtractable quantity:

A little more her mother loved her. (p. 312) When you hurt people,  
they begin to love you less. That's what careless words do. They  
make people love you a little bit less. (p. 107)

The world goes mechanic. But still, it keeps something of its former beastliness<sup>1</sup>—above all the relationship of a mother and her child. Ammu and her children (p. 312), tale of Kunti and Karna (p. 221), Sophie Mol and Margaret Kochamma—all resonate in the area of feelings, which balances the mechanization.

How does the book bring us down to earth? It expresses corporality by frequent use of human secrets, such as vomit, spit, shit, blood and sperm. It takes us to this confused world through scent, sight and sound. I lie under a heavy blanket and breathe stale air. I become a part of this story, expecting something terrible—which is referred to as *the terror*. I am sitting behind a tree and observe the characters.

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<sup>1</sup>To avoid any misunderstandings, let me denote the word as it will be used in this paper. It means the preference to behave as a beast, to possess beasts' instincts and their way of existence. Is interchangeable with natural instinct.

We witness the atmosphere of knowing that something terrible will happen. As opposed to the characters in the book, we do not live chronologically. Instead, we see different fragments, each of them crowded with anticipation of the *future*. But when we get to the end, we finally realize that there is *no future* (p. 320).

Shall we take this as a joke? Expecting grandiose scene of *the terror*, we are given only a porno-like description of lovers' date filled with pathos. If there is no hope, let's enjoy our animal dispositions. The only Meaning (which should be, according to the above, the topic of the book) being waiting for *tomorrow* (p. 321).

I find it very naïve to regard this book simply as a criticism of the Hindu society. Because it shows (through the example of Chacko who studied at Oxford) that every society is bound by the same laws. Let us look thoroughly how the book describes the *laws of society*.

First of all, it tries to capture the use of language—means of communication. Phrases, which people use with little content (such as “She told her to Stopit. And she Stopited”) always differ from the rest. Frequently used distinctions include capitalizing, writing words without spaces.

As p. 32 states, the laws of society are very old. They did not come with any particular moment, nor can they be attributed to persons. The laws cover the habits of people, all their prejudices. These laws *are people*.

The book includes many *poems* without obvious sense. They seek to evoke the childish mind and its reflection of the environment around. The use of rhymes in these poems shows the ambition of the author to get closer to a child's mind. She does not simply say “His face contoured”—she says *gristly-bristly*.

The main principle of building the sentences in the book asks for short ones. They are put next to long sentences, thus creating an impression of change. Sometimes the sentences become gradually longer

The God of Loss. / The God of Small Things. / The God of Goosebumps and Sudden Smiles.

We may call this an *intermezzo*—it holds no narration but it helps create the atmosphere for the story. This links us to the internal references of the book. The same contrast, as I have mentioned before concerning mechanization and beastliness<sup>2</sup>, dwells between the fragmentation of the book<sup>3</sup> and the structure of references. The web of *specific words and phrases* allows more associations and connects several parts together. The most appropriate example is the word *egg*. Two-*egg* twins denotes Rachel and Estha. *Egg* is then used on p. 98

[...] Estha's hand was wet and hot and sticky. It had egg white on it. White egg white.

We must not forget what *white* refers to: Velutha's<sup>4</sup> name means *white* (paradoxically, because he is so black). This expresses the bizarre connection of the twins to Velutha differently than the narration.

Let us now proceed to my favorite passage. How a *boy* becomes a *man*. How a child becomes a part of the adults' world?<sup>5</sup> Through the *rite of pissing*. The environment looks after the child and stimulates him to do things correctly; to piss correctly.

To piss in the pot would be Defeat. [...] He searched for Height, and in a corner of HIS, he found it. (p. 92)

The second sentence offers a bright interpretation. Search in your heart and there you will find what makes you adult. Similarly to *The Labyrinth of the*

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<sup>2</sup>Although these two do not have to be necessarily in contrast.

<sup>3</sup>Represented for instance by retrospectiveness—we do not often know what is going on now and what are memories or past

<sup>4</sup>A pariah, good friend of the children, and the secret lover of their mother Ammu.

<sup>5</sup>Let me discriminate the women for a while.

*World and the Paradise of Heart* by COMENIUS<sup>6</sup>, after a long journey the pilgrim finds God in HIS heart. In the world without God (in this book, no God exists, only Church), he can find maturity only in the chamber of HIS. Laughably, the human kind returns to *rites* again. Or more precisely, it sticks to them.

Where else do we find contrasts? They often appear in the simplest form of two objects placed one next to the other and describing their properties.

The lemondrink was cold and sweet. The penis hot and hard. (p. 98)<sup>7</sup>

Ridiculously, the dialog continues with a normal chatting about family and business. In the end poor Estha has to leave his mother. Unsurprisingly, this main theme of the book<sup>8</sup> reflects the story of Karna and Kunti. Moreover, the narrator verifies the translation on p. 224

[Rahel and Estha were] Trapped in the bog of the story that was and wasn't theirs.

They are going to end the same, as thousand (including Karna) did—and yet they can do nothing against it. The same constraints limit Velutha—when he cannot do more than one thing at once.

Because all people are confined. And *The God of Small Things* by ARUNDHATI ROY aims to describe the taste of feeling this confinement.

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<sup>6</sup>The full text is accessible on <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~tay10010/labyrinth/bookE.htm>

<sup>7</sup>Estha goes to the theatre and after he had pissed in HIS a lemondrink man makes him fellate his penis.

<sup>8</sup>Compare to the Oidipus' complex as proposed by psychoanalysis.