

# GLIMPSES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCANDAL IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

*Dr. Karthikkumar*

*Department of English*

*&*

*L. Venthen Ithaya*

*(Part Time) Department of English  
Annamalai University*

*Annamalainagar, Tamilnadu*

Compared favorably to the works of Faulkner and Dickens, Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things* is a modern classic that has been read and loved worldwide. The seven-year-old twins Estha and Rahel see their world shaken irrevocably by the arrival of their beautiful young cousin, Sophie. It is an event that will lead to an illicit liaison and tragedies accidental and intentional, exposing "big things that lurk unsaid" in a country drifting dangerously toward unrest. Many different stories are fused to form a kaleidoscopic impression of events. It is a world haunted by hunters and the hunted. Their high-pitched slogan is "Caste is Class, comrades"(266). Caste-division, religious diversity, class, and patriarchal family hierarchy, and the international influences — colonialism, communism, global travel, and commerce — all reveal themselves in the cultural objects, traditions, beliefs, and the actions of the characters in the novel. Roy intensifies these forces by contrasting the small things with big things of the novel. Lush, lyrical, and unnerving, *The God of Small Things* is an award-winning landmark that started for its author an esteemed career of fiction and political commentary that continues unabated.

The novel shows the ghosts of domination, colonial devastation, political uprisings, and historical tragedies of India. Roy visibly presents the contradiction between the Small and the Big. The implicit contradictory ideas are the foot of psychological scandal. Discrimination shown among the human beings causes the embarrassment. So Roy adopts and challenges the happenings in Kerala. The query is “is it happening only in Kerala?” This outrage is all over the country and to some extent all over the world. These paradoxical circumstances are maintained throughout the novel.

Much has been discussed whether psychology is art or science. But it seems to lie between the two. The term Psychology can be broadly defined as the study of the human mind and behavior. Psychology, as the study of human mind and behavior, explains how it affects all facets of the human experience (Mangal 8). The above meaning holds good only to certain extent. Hence the expression cannot be defined conclusively. The term can also be taken as a systematic approach to understand people’s thoughts, emotions, behavior, and other poignant issues at deeper level. Here the term behavior is understood in the context of both, the physical and social conditions. Thus, it is a pattern exhibited by an individual in a normal and conditioned situation. Scandal is a widely publicized allegation or set of allegations that damages (or tries to damage) the reputation of an institution, individual or creed. A scandal may be based on true or false allegations or a mixture of both. Briefly put, it is damaging one’s reputation or public disgrace. Man is both physic and psyche. Human beings live by interdependence of these factors. The attack on psyche may not reveal any external marks to visibility as seen in physical attack. Every ill treatment of an individual affects one’s mind and this humiliation is expressed through behaviour. Whether corporal attack or cerebral attack it has direct rejoinder in the person’s behaviour. Therefore they are inseparable aspects of one’s personality. The characters in the

novel feel either alienated or marginalized due to some reason, and, thus, they suffer from psychological problems.

A leading female in the novel, Ammu, is mother of Estha and Rahel, a two egged twins. She married Babu but she soon became disillusioned because her husband was an alcoholic. Once he tried her into sleeping with his boss, Ammu left Babu and settled back in Ayemenem with the twins. Here she develops an affair with the Untouchable handyman, Velutha, so she is banished from her own house. She dies at the age of thirty-one while out of town on business. Mammachi is Estha's and Rahel's blind grandmother. She is unhappily married to Pappachi, who beats her terribly until Chacko defends her. She plays the violin and generally keeps to herself, except when Ammu's and Velutha's affair is exposed. Baby Kochamma is Rahel's and Estha's grandaunt. She has a degree in ornamental gardening, but in her old age she simply watches television and writes her diary. Baby Kochamma has a vindictive and manipulative personality; she accuses Velutha of raping Ammu and then pressures Estha to confirm it. The male hero of the novel, Velutha, is an untouchable Paravan who serves as a handyman for Ammu, Mammachi, and the rest of the family. He has a close relationship with Estha and Rahel, whom he treats lovingly. He is the father figure they never had. Velutha develops an affair with Ammu. After he is accused of raping Ammu and kidnapping the children, the police beat him nearly to death. These three women relate and respond to Velutha, who is a Paravan, in different ways. The whole novel moves around them.

The intention behind exploring the facts of one's life is to show that whatever happens in their life is due to the inner mind of the individual. This mind is all the time controlled by the external factors like social set up, caste, community, creed, and culture related to the group they belong to causes the natural disparity. The chief focus of this article is to show how these

external forces change the course of one's mind resulting in behavior causing indignity. For the purpose of brevity it takes up the two leading characters in the fiction.

The marginalized characters are like tamed animals to act according to their masters' orders. They are pushed and pulled throughout the novel for fulfilling frustrating odd jobs for others. The worst part is their needs never seem to have place in the light but in darkness. This imagery of darkness emerges at the start of the novel and pervades till the end, establishing an unrelenting sense of anxiety and dread. The dark tone of the novel underscores the torment of all the characters in the novel. Dark imagery evokes strong emotion throughout the novel, combining innocence and evil, to stress the narrative's dark emotional tone, displaying evil impulses, and incite intense feelings, signaling the tinge of impending tyranny.

A leading female character in the fiction has been representing mood of depression as well as rebellion. She is personified with all sorts of misdeeds. In her case, she never had what she wanted without restraint but had to fight against the social norms. In the novel everything seems to be opposing her. "That the air, the sky, the trees, the sun, the rain, the light and darkness were all slowly turning to sand. That sand would...pull her down" (212). Ammu knows she is spiraling, giving in to her desire to love a lower caste man, but she is powerless to stop herself. "She had found her way in through a hole in the windscreen...She never found her way out" (280). Like a caged sparrow, Rahel, Estha, Ammu, remain imprisoned, unable to find a way out, trapped by malevolence. The dark imagery intensifies the horror of a repressed past as it haunts the present through the characters, culture, and nature. When Ammu divorces her husband, she returns to the Ayemenem House "unwelcomed" by her parents (42). Baby Kochamma often reminds the twins that they live on "sufferance" in the Ayemenem House,

“where they really had no right to be” (44). Culture has taken away the sense of home for Ammu, Rahel, and Estha and turned the house into a prison.

Detachment from one person gets attracted to the other. It is very simple here if a person is denied of his rights, breaks away from the social set up. That is what exactly happens with Ammu when she is rejected by her family members she develops an affinity with Velutha, a lower caste man. If Ammu’s family were to accept her the whole story would have been different. Amidst all these rebellious Ammu never gave up her desire to achieve what she most wanted. That is what needs to be admired in this character. The struggle to rise up each time one falls makes all the difference. Ammu being a so called weak gender reveals to be very strong here. Another interesting point to bear in mind while reading this novel is the relatively high status of women in Kerala. One can simply imagine where the women are held in high position suddenly causing decline by damaging the long held reputation due to a single person’s misconduct bringing disgrace and offense to whole of its kind.

The best (skill) receives the worst treatment. Velutha is extremely gifted with his hands. As Chacko says on Velutha “practically runs the factory” (264). These quotes reveal that Velutha has achieved an extraordinary position in the factory, despite being a Paravan. Bearing this in mind, it becomes very hard to speak for anyone else except the most humiliated person owing to his caste. Birth and death is not in our hands but once born everything is ours. Having born a Paravan, Velutha transgresses many of the norms of a Paravan which causes dishonor to his society. That Velutha crosses the forbidden line in having a relationship with a Touchable offspring. Velutha does not behave like an untouchable is supposed to behave. Because of this, Baby Kochamma warns that he is getting too comfortable around the children and in the

company of touchable. Even Velutha's own father worries that he is stepping out of bounds. At one stage Velutha's father offers to kill Velutha because he, an untouchable himself, knows the extent to which this scandal would enrage the community and because he believes in the same un-climbable ladder of the caste system and the boundaries in which his lot is supposed to exist.

Anyone else with different experiences might argue for others but he stands out. Can a Subaltern Speak? This is the question that scandalizes the whole issue here. The archetypal understanding of an untouchable is to be silent in other words a passive receiver. Ridiculous words uttered against Velutha before he leaves are: "If I find you on my property tomorrow I'll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I'll have you killed!" "We'll see about that," Velutha said quietly (269). More so, far worse venomous words coming out of her mouth "*Like animals*, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. *Like a dog with a bitch on heat*" (244). 'Subaltern consciousness' is something that Roy dooms as utterly hopeless. The pure subaltern cannot, by definition, move upwards in the social hierarchy or make his or her voice heard. To speak, in Spivak's sense, is when there has been a "transaction between the speaker and the listener" and to her there is "something of a *notspeakingness* is the very notion of subalternity". This *notspeakingness* is revealed through Velutha's paralyzed brother, Kuttappan who cries out all the time. They can cry as loud as they can but speaking is forbidden. What differentiates human beings from animal is speech. On the other hand crying, howling, and screaming all for the animals. These are symbols of pain and agony.

This scream becomes a symbol of his inability to speak; his voice becomes a scream that echoes all over but unheard. Readers can not see any standard law in the novel but a plurality of relationships and opportunistic laws. Even though Ammu pays for their relationship in the end, Velutha is far more vulnerable and exposed. This social distance between the communities, a

difference in class and position in society that proves to be fatal to Velutha. All these extracts substantiate that importance is given to the external identity but none to see beyond it. Anybody can be killed but what about the feelings, emotions, wishes and the mind? How can anyone kill all these? Henry David Thoreau in his "Civil Disobedience" talks very plainly about the imprisonment of the physical body while the mind goes around freely. Here he says about the nature of man comparing with plant. "If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man" (Thoreau 128). It is not about physical death but the feelings. Every species has the right to live and live respectively.

From the above extracts and discussions one can see a point that scandal is not only linked with the physical body but also with the mind. Much has been said and done by the characters, but how? Each one is trapped by one or the other social set up trying to break away from them. In this process some become scapegoats for others. The struggle between small and BIG is obvious. Big refers to positive and small signify darker forces of individual passion, natural energy, and social restriction. Big lives lavishly while small dies scantily. As Rahel observes, "...only the Small Things were said. The Big Things lurked unsaid inside" (165). The tension between 'big things' and 'small things' creates the state of affairs for the novel to go on. This tension is weighed down by the BIG while the small has to yield repressing all their willpower. Small is to subjugate while the big usurps things safely as they fancy.

Velutha is obvious to see that he is marginalized and subordinated. Being a Paravan and an Untouchable his skills go unnoticed. The society he lives in still regards his kind as inferior and unclean. Roy gives us a somewhat euphemistic picture of his status showing how Velutha appears in Ammu's dream: "He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors" (206). She continues to develop a lofty sense of injustice and "...the mulish, reckless

streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big” (172-3). Velutha, "The God of Small Things," slips from place to place undetected, enjoying life's small pleasures without paying attention to the "Big" fact that he is an untouchable and should not be playing with the touchable (twins). Velutha is a scapegoat destined to die for the sake of a Kochamma's family repute. As Jesus did for the mankind.

A pathetic thing about Ammu is that being born in high class receives almost equal treatment as of Velutha. In punishing people they follow a standers law. She is penalized from the society for having illicit relationship with Velutha. She too dies in the novel. The most affected characters in the novel are Rahel and Esther. They are forever haunted by a tragedy resulting from their mother's affair with a lower caste man. As young children growing into adolescence and to adults had to face the worst criticism owing to their mother which is more than their maturation. This scorn poured on them to demoralize them. Roy presents several different female characters in her novel *The God of Small Things*; all are prisoners of an institution with meager degree of freedom.

The fact that all are emotional 'creatures' is not acknowledged by many. Emotional factors seem to have no place in the lives of Velutha, Ammu, Baby Kochamma, twins, Comrade Pillai and many others in the story. The taboos of the society divert the happenings to psychological scandals found in the novel.

Although the novel has no single protagonist and a definitive moral, it certainly maneuvers through implicit and explicit make up of one's life to which contemporary society tends to be too frenzied or farsighted to pay heed. Roy does her best in the novel to enfranchise the "Small Things". *The God of Small Things* is a herald from the top of the tower of the marginalized by illustrating their experiences and sufferings which have direct link with one's



attitude. This repetition of the terms “*Tomorrow? Tomorrow*” (321) reveals that they never hoped anything big. This word can also incorporate meanings such as: if there is today there will be Tomorrow. Tomorrow gives a hope of becoming better. Tomorrow is an option open to any risk. Tomorrow is again can be taken as tomorrow never comes because anything can happen in a day. If not now then when? But whatever may be the case Tomorrow gives hope and be so to the readers to go on.

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