

Echoes of Silence: Exploring Quietude in The God of Small Things

Ms. Deepa

Assistant Professor

Department of English

R.B.D Mahila Mahavidyalaya Bijnor

Email: deepa@hs.iitr.ac.in

Dr. Sanjit Kumar Mishra

Professor

Department of HSS,

IIT, Roorkee

Abstract

The God of Small Things explores a psychological oeuvre of Ammu's family. The novel beautifully captures a traumatic childhood in caged memories. Silence is a recurring motif in the novel, that serves us to unsettle the burning issue of subalternity, caste-ridden society, and the hegemony of the patriarchal world. The narrative is structured around the social dichotomy of the 'other', whether a woman, an untouchable or a child marginalized from the center. The novel examines the power discourse and social binaries in the context of silence, which plays a multifaceted role such as a symbol of repression and trauma reflecting the social, cultural and personal constraints faced by the characters. The fragmented narratives also explore the silenced historical pasts of its characters. This saga also unravels the non-verbal understanding of the verbal. The twin fosters a bond beyond spoken language and becomes a powerful device to reveal the complexity of memory and identity which is debatable in this paper.

Keywords

Silence, repression, trauma, social hierarchies, subaltern

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Ms. Deepa

Dr. Sanjit Kumar Mishra

Echoes of Silence:
Exploring Quietude in The
God of Small Things

Notions

July-Dec. 2024

Vol. XV, No. 2,

pp. 159-165

Article No. 21

Online available at :

[https://anubooks.com/
journal-volume/notions-
vol-xv-no2-july-dec-2024](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/notions-vol-xv-no2-july-dec-2024)

Introduction

“Childhood tiptoed out.
Silence slid in like a bolt.”

-Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things

The novel which brought the Man Booker Prize to its author and India speaks of an unspeakable saga of a broken family. The themes of this novel vary from silence, forbidden love and societal constraints. Apart from this the theme of quietude or silence plays a significant role in the narrative both in the literal and metaphorical sense.

“The God of Small Things” published in 1997 by Arundhati Roy is a novel that won the Booker Prize. The story is set in the small town of Ayemenem in Kerala, India. It unfolds in a non-linear fashion weaving together the past and present experiences of its characters. The novel focuses on the tragic lives of fraternal twins Estha and Rahel. Who are profoundly affected by a series of traumatic events in their childhood.

The plot centers around the twins’ family, particularly their mother Ammu. Who falls in love with Velutha, an untouchable man. This forbidden relationship sets off a chain of catastrophic events exposing the rigid caste system and societal norms of India. The novel also delves into the family’s history revealing secrets and past tragedies that have shaped their present lives.

Key themes in the novel include the oppressive nature of social and cultural norms. The innocence of childhood contrasted with the harshness of the adult world and the impact of forbidden love. Roy’s lyrical prose and vivid descriptions bring to life the rich cultural tapestry of Kerala while also critiquing the deep-seated injustices within its society.

In this saga the “Ayemenem house” becomes a poignant symbol of loss, and decay and serves as an agent throughout the small and big episodes that shape the idiosyncrasies of its characters’ lives. Emphasizing how personal and political histories are deeply intertwined. The monologic appearance of the Ayemenem house proportionates a thousand. In “Problems of Dostoevsky” Bakhtin explains that a world understood in a monologic way is one seen from a single unified perspective (Hays, 2005, p. 9). Monologism happens when universal truths are called truth-istina. Don’t allow for other kinds of truth like truth-Pravda. Bakhtin links this to the Renaissance in Europe. Which focused on beauty and truth unlike the medieval period’s carnivalesque culture. Inspired by Rabelais. Bakhtin says that in medieval times truth was often rejected or mocked by

popular culture through humorous and satirical dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 68). To the readers the silent appearance of the house presents the hollowness and shortness of human life. This paper tries to explore such discursive flow in its characters and is an effort to find their quietude on various aspects.

Happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain:

In “The God of Small Things,” the story is deep and complex with many different voices as Bakhtin describes it. Characters stand out because of how they speak making them important to the story. Readers and critics understand the characters by watching what they do listening to what they say and even paying attention to when they’re quiet. Language including the way characters talk is a big part of who they are. How they speak their tone and their accents all help create their personalities. It’s interesting how both talking and staying silent can be powerful in literature. They both help convey important messages. In the novel the conversations between characters are intense almost like they’re competing with each other. Just like Bakhtin talks about in his idea of discourse. The way characters talk is like a form of art reflecting the diversity of voices in the world. Which Bakhtin calls Heteroglossia.

Heteroglossia is all about how language reflects the different social situations and perspectives within a culture. Every word or meaning in speech or text comes from a social context where many different meanings exist. These meanings develop their social significance based on their relationship with other possible meanings. Texts are considered heteroglossic because they acknowledge the presence of various socio-semiotic realities whether directly or indirectly. This means that every meaning in a text arises from a social situation where many different meanings could have been expressed and the text gains its social meaning from how it relates to these alternative meanings. When we look closely at texts involving characters like Estha, Ammu, Velutha and Rahel. We see a variety of language techniques that reflect this diversity presenting readers with a rich tapestry of voices and perspectives.

Arundhati Roy talks about Estha in her book. She describes him as a kid who didn’t talk much and it’s hard to say exactly when he stopped talking. It wasn’t like a sudden thing more like a gradual quietening down. There are more parts in the book where Estha’s quietness is mentioned.

When Estha became quiet, that quietness stuck with him. It wrapped around him like a swampy hug making him feel safe but also strange. It made him feel like he was back in the womb listening to a very old heartbeat. It crept into his head like a sneaky octopus messing with his memories and stealing his words. It made his

thoughts feel empty and numb like they couldn't be spoken. People might have thought he wasn't really there just a shadow of himself. Over time they started to avoid the outside world. He got used to the weird feeling inside him like an octopus squirting dark ink on his past, making it hard to see. The reason for his silence got buried deep inside him like a secret nobody could find.

Iser's argument about a reader's response helps us understand Roy's techniques. In literature communication isn't just about following a set code. It's about the interplay between what's explicitly stated and what's left unsaid. Roy gives us clues about Estha's silence. Which helps us grasp why he chooses not to speak. Imagine being in Estha's shoes knowing the last words your friend heard branded someone as a liar. It's no wonder he'd be hesitant to speak after that. The weight of just uttering one word makes him realize the power of silence. Estha realizes it's better to keep quiet than risk hurting someone he cares about. Instead of carefully choosing his words, he just stops speaking altogether. It's like his mind shuts down and he doesn't have constant thoughts anymore. He seems really peaceful and calm like nothing can bother him. But when Rahel comes back something shifts inside him. Even if it's not obvious on the outside. She's the only one who can break through his silence. As Estha puts it "It had been quiet in Estha's head until Rahel came."

Contrary to Estha's silence, Velutha craves for language; a real one, but he is betrayed and repudiated from it. His mind and the body were respective to each other. The mind, dispossessed of the body, has become incoherent which the body governed by senses no longer understands. This tragic and irreparable fissure that develops between the mind and the body is in the aftermath of the death of language for Velutha. The futility of the persistent effort of speaking in an alien tongue is glaring in Velutha's subsequent interaction with Comrade Pillai (the local Communist Party leader) who he approaches for help and counsel. As he tries to relate to Pillai all that had transpired:

Velutha stayed quiet, listening to his own words bounce back at him. He felt like he was talking to someone distant, separated by a barrier. His words didn't seem to matter to the person he spoke to. It was like his voice twisted around him, leaving him feeling confused. As Comrade Pillai left his voice lingered echoing slogans. But it all faded into meaningless phrases. Velutha saw how human-made structures like religion could be destroyed by human actions.

Velutha's silence was powerful. He didn't need to speak out loud to rebel. He simply listened and stayed calm, refusing to follow suggestions that didn't sit right with him. On the other hand, Estha chose to stay silent as a form of punishment,

feeling restrained by language. One had the power of speech and used silence as a tool of resistance, while the other felt trapped by words, unable to express himself fully.

Velutha's subaltern attitude in "The God of Small Things" is a blend of quiet defiance, agency, and tragic resistance. He embodies the struggles and aspirations of those marginalized by societal structures, challenging the injustices of the caste system through his actions and relationships. Through Velutha, Arundhati Roy poignantly depicts the complexities of subaltern resistance and the enduring quest for dignity and equality.

Velutha's subaltern attitude is characterized by a quiet yet profound defiance. Unlike other members of his caste who may accept their subjugation, Velutha exhibits a subtle resistance through his actions. His love affair with Ammu, a woman from a higher caste is a bold act of defiance against societal norms. This relationship, though hidden symbolizes a rejection of the rigid caste boundaries and a yearning for personal freedom. Both Velutha and Ammu are the victims of social castration both are deprived of their rights.

Ammu's silence in "The God of Small Things" is a powerful narrative device that underscores the themes of repression, forbidden love and personal suffering. It highlights the societal constraints imposed on women and the lower castes in Indian society. While also serving as a form of silent rebellion. Through Ammu's character Arundhati Roy poignantly illustrates the devastating effects of societal oppression and the quiet strength required to resist it. Ammu married against the will of her parents, divorced and fell in love with a parven a low-status man. In the novel her character is shown through the eyes of her twins. She died at the tender age of thirty-one. Not old. Not young. But a viable die-able age. The reader is shocked to find out the protagonist has died already when the novel begins. We introspect her from the eyes of Rahel and Estha as the most beautiful woman they have ever seen, and sometimes she is the strangest person ever.

Silence announced its arrival forcefully everywhere, the trapped voice voiced the suppressed emotions of the monozygotic twins in the novel with Rahel's arrival in Ayemenem after twenty- four years. Language is not a necessity between them Rahel acknowledges Estha's traumatic experience in Abhilash talkies without being physically present at the time. She is aware of his painful silence after Velutha is arrested. Estha covered himself with the shield of silence. So did the society overpower the discourse created within it.

Conclusion

In this study we have traversed the multifaceted landscape of silence,

examining its existence and significance across various dimensions of human experience. This study has illuminated silence not merely as the absence of sound but as a profound and dynamic phenomenon with the power to form our psychological, social, and cultural environments. On a psychological level silence has emerged as a critical component in mental well-being. It offers a hideout for introspection and self-recognition, enabling individuals to process thoughts and emotions without external distractions. This paper inquires that moments of quietude can foster creativity enhance concentration and reduce stress contributing to overall mental health. Silence in meditation and mindfulness practices for instance has been shown to cultivate a deeper connection with the self and promote a sense of inner peace.

In “The God of Small Things,” Arundhati Roy intricately weaves silence into the fabric of her narrative, using it as a powerful and multidimensional motif that reflects the characters’ inner lives and the socio-political realities of their world. This study has explored the various proportions of silence within the novel, revealing its significance as a tool for communication, a shield for trauma, and a reflection of societal obstructions. Silence often speaks louder than words. Characters use silence to convey emotions and messages that cannot be articulated openly due to cultural taboos, personal fears, or societal expectations. For instance, the silence between Ammu and Velutha encapsulates the depth of their forbidden love, a love that cannot be spoken of in the rigidly stratified society of Kerala. Similarly, the silence surrounding Sophie Mol’s death symbolizes the unspoken guilt and unresolved grief that haunts the family.

It also serves as a refuge for characters dealing with trauma and pain. Estha’s muteness after the traumatic events reflects his withdrawal from a world that has failed him. Illustrating how silence can be both a symptom and a defense mechanism against overwhelming emotional pain. Rahel’s silences are filled with the weight of her fractured childhood and the loss of her twin brother’s voice. These silent spaces in the characters’ lives are laden with the echoes of their suffering and the burdens they carry. The silence enforced by caste, class, and gender hierarchies stifles the voices of those who are marginalized. The forbidden love between Ammu and Velutha was silenced by the strictures of caste and family honor. Exemplifies how societal norms suppress individual desires and freedoms. Silence becomes a tool of control used to maintain the status quo. Baby Kochamma’s manipulative use of silence and misinformation to maintain her power within the family highlights how silence can be wielded as a weapon to manipulate and control.

In conclusion, silence in “The God of Small Things” is a powerful narrative device that enriches the story’s emotional and thematic depth. It challenges readers to recognize the complex nature of silence and its impact on individuals and society. By exploring the silences within the novel we gain a deeper admiration for the characters’ struggles and the intricate ways in which Roy illustrates the intersections of personal and social histories. This study calls for a continued examination of silence in literature recognizing its potential to reveal truths that lie beyond the reach of spoken language.

References

1. Dhawan, R K, ed. Arundhati Roy The Novelist Extraordinary. New Delhi: Prestige Chatterjee, Shoma. Indian Women From Darkness to Light. Calcutta: Parumita Publications, 2000. Print.
2. <https://www.ijlll.org/vol5/224-LL307.pdf>
3. https://www.bartleby.com/essay/The-Theme-Of-Silence-In-God-Of-FA3JU8XZWFR#google_vignette
4. <https://examplay.wordpress.com/rhetoric-notes/mikhail-bakhtin-discourse-in-the-novel/>
5. <https://circleuncoiled.wordpress.com/2013/05/10/mikhail-bakhtin-discourse-in-the-novel/>
6. H. Sacks, E. A. Schegloff, and G. Jefferson, “The simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation, *Language*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 696-735, 1974. [5
7. M. Ephratt, “The functions of silence, *Journal of Pragmatics*, pp. 1909-1938, 2008.
8. Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 2002. Print.