



Examining traumatic childhood and memories in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

This research paper aims to study the impact of childhood trauma on a person's psychology by examining Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. In this novel, Roy has explicitly given out the situation that can affect a person's psychology. Childhood is mainly the Most Tender phase of a human's life. It is meant to enjoy more but life is unpredictable and sometimes it can bring out the situation that might leave a long lasting and negative impact on a child's psychology. This impact can slowly turn into severe sufferings and takes the form of trauma. Trauma indicates serious impacts on a person's psyche. To revive those traumatic events, memory plays an important role. Due to the recurrence of those traumatic events through memory mechanism, it might be difficult for a person to forget those bad events. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is the best example of disturbed childhood that leads to disturbed adulthood consequently. Mainly, the twins Estha and Rahel faced childhood trauma. Roy never leaves any opportunity to bring forward the sufferings of people through her fiction and non-fiction as well. She has very beautifully portrayed the impact of traumatic childhood on a person's psyche through Estha and Rahel.

Keywords: traumatic childhood, memories, sufferings, repercussions

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a widely acclaimed novel and it has won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 1997 due to its unique structure and valiant themes. The novel deals with various themes like female oppression, caste- discrimination, patriarchy, untouchability etc. In brief, the novel has all the qualities to make it award-winning. With the publication of this novel, Roy established herself as a socially committed novelist. Though the novel has received a lot of criticism, nothing can stop this novel to grab the attention of serious readers.

Childhood is considered the happy phase of life. Children are a very beautiful creation of God. They are considered the foundation of the society and to strengthen the foundation, they must be nurtured well. But somehow the situation goes the other way and they have to face the cruelties of the world in one way or the other. Trauma is derived from the Greek word 'Trauma' which simply means the injury or wound- mental or physical wound. Trauma signifies mental wounds. Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History*, describes trauma:

... a phenomenon that not only arises in the reading of literary or philosophical texts but emerges most prominently within the wider historical and political realms, that is, the peculiar and paradoxical experience of trauma. In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of the hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon. (11, 1991).

The God of Small Things is the perfect example of the portrayal of childhood trauma and its severe repercussions on the rest of life. This novel delineates the story of Ammu, her twins Estha and Rahel and her family. The novel is set in Kerala, Ayemenem. The life of Ammu has been full of ups and downs. Due to her chaotic life, her children also suffer simultaneously. Their childhood remains an unhappy one. Right from the beginning, they face a lot of atrocities due to her mother's divorce. They come to Ayemenem where they witness the cruel realities of life and the world as well. Being a single mother, Ammu is not able to take care of her children properly. In her pursuit of happiness, she starts avoiding the demands of her children. Estha and Rahel face maltreatment, insult, neglect by their own family members and other people as well. All these terrible mishaps with them lead them to face traumatic childhood. As Pradeep Kumar Giri in his research paper "Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Traumatic Distress in Children" mentions:

As there is not peace and harmony in the family Ammu is in an angry mood. Estha and Rahel become victims of their mother's anger and dissatisfaction. Their survival is threatened with bullying of grownups. Rahel develops nervousness. She feels Pappachi's moth fluttering in her heart. The children witnessed the violence and torture by Pappachi to Mammachi. They are indulged to face a number of violence and stressful events. (Giri 1432)

Estha and Rahel's childhood is filled with terrible events. They are not allowed to enjoy the situation of happiness. Roy has employed flashback techniques to demonstrate the impact of childhood trauma and how it influences the lives of Estha and Rahel. Hope Jennings in her Scholarly paper "The Ethics of Nostalgia in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* " comments on the Traumatic childhood of Estha and Rahel. She shows how their past haunts them; "Rahel and Estha are perpetually living with the ghosts of past and due to the nature of their trauma, time for them has become frozen like Rahel's you watch with the hands pointed out it at ten to two. This is symbolic itself in spite of the text's fluid narrative movements between past and present..."(Jennings 132).

It would not be an exaggeration if we say that this novel is a document of childhood trauma and its repercussions on the rest of the lives. Jennings again rightly observes; "the novel is a retracing of the Traumatic loss and displacement"(qtd. in Giri 1432). Their sufferings starts with the divorce of their parents in Ayemenem and then Sophie Mol's arrival in their life from England. Baby Kochamma and other servants in the house often call them by their derogatory names. On the contrary, Sophie Mol gets pampered due to her white skin. Estha and Rahel plea for some amount of love throughout their lives. That's why they enjoy the company of Velutha. Janet Wilson opines; "The children enjoy playing with Velutha, greedy for love, even if it could come only from one, who to the adults in an 'untouchable'" (Wilson 74). They start having insecurity when Sophie Mol appears as the center of attraction for everyone. This Maltreatment leads to Sophie Mol's death. This incident affects the lives of Estha and Rahel consequently. As Roy writes:

Rahel looked around her and saw that she was in a Play. But she had only a small part. She was just the landscape. A flower perhaps. Or a tree.
A face in the crowd. A townspeople.
Nobody said Hello to Rahel. Not even the Blue Army in the greenheat. (*The God of Small Things* 172-173).

Rahel has to face discrimination, abuse and neglect due to being a girl child. Akshaya Kumar observes; "Rahel's account of her deprived childhood, reckless adulthood and drifting womanhood bears a straight and obvious equivalence with Roy's own life-graph"(Kumar 62). Roy has shown three generations of girl children where they are destined to face atrocities due to patriarchy. Even Ammu, in her childhood, was denied to complete her education and her share of property as well. Ammu and her twins are even deprived of their love. Later Estha and Rahel are considered responsible for Sophie Mol's death as Pradeep comments; "They have been victims of past memories of series of deaths, violence, enforced separation, bullying, neglect, humiliation and stressful times. Their life cannot move forward smoothly as other children's due to the Traumatic events occurred at the age of seven" (Giri 1433).

The most dreadful events that happened in their life was Sophie Mol's death. Velutha gets trapped to take the blame on his head and beaten by police to death. Estha and Rahel are convinced by Baby Kochamma to speak against Velutha in police station. As Roy writes; "What matters is whether you want to go to jail and make Ammu go to jail because of *you*. It's upto you to decide that" (*The God of Small Things* 318). This is how she glibly tricks Estha and Rahel to speak against Velutha. As Roy writes:

"The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said Yes.
Childhood tiptoed out.
Silence slid in like a bolt.
Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared. (*The God of Small Things* 320).

Though they know they have done something wrong to Velutha, they still expect for a miracle that can save his life. They want to save themselves from regret also. When Estha comes to Rahel, he tells her the truth:

'You were right. It wasn't him. It was Urumban.'
'Thang god', Rahel whispered back.
'Where d'you think he is?'
'Escaped to Africa.' (*The God of Small Things* 320).

But they are wrong. Police killed Velutha and thus it proved a horrible turning point in their life. They even lost their mother also. These traumatic events left indelible scars on their minds. They get seperated. Their separation also adds fuel to their sufferings. Ammu's family gets completely broken due to this event. The seperation just brings a sense of emptiness in their life. Due to this incident, all the traumatic memories continue to stay with them. Estha and Rahel, being twins, face everything with each other. They matter a lot to each other. Their traumatic memories haunts them throughout the life. Their minds are filled with psychological wounds. They get

to meet with each other after twenty three years, but the time they spent in separation also filled with sufferings. Rahel had to divorce her husband who was quite insensitive to her needs. Estha went to America but twenty three years later, Estha's notebook was found and his handwriting symbolically indicates that he is a disturbed and relentless personality. As Roy writes:

The laboured form of each letter and the irregular space between words was full of struggle for control over the errant, self-willed pencil. The sentiment, in contrast, was lucid. *I hate Miss Mittens and I think the nickers are TORN.*

On the front of the book, Estha had robbed out his surname with spit, and...he had written in pencil *Un-known*. Esthappen *Un-known*. (*The God of Small Things* 156).

Their traumatic childhood affects their lives at every moment of their life. They even feel suffocated in the company of other people and that's why Rahel's marriage ends up with divorce. A person's state of mind can be analyzed through his/her actions and that's why Roy uses this pattern to give an insight into the psyche of Estha. L. Chris Fox rightly observes; "Traumatic memory patterns inspire not only the content but also the narrative structure. It seems to share the urgency to communicate, a problem of repression which implies a desire for social healing, figured perhaps in the (re) union of Estha and Rahel" (Fox 56).

Estha and Rahel can rightly feel and understand each other. So, when they meet twenty three years later, their condition is like; "a pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no plot or narratives. Stumbling through their parts, nursing someone else's sorrows. Grieving someone else's grief" (*The God of Small Things* 191). Their traumatic childhood has destroyed their innocence completely. It has made them sinners. It has developed and ingrained the sense of insecurity within them. They are wounded due to their distraught childhood and so they have drifted from the right path and found relief in each other's arms. As Pradeep Kumar Giri observes; "They have been victims of past memories of series of deaths, violence, enforced separation, bullying, neglect, humiliation and stressful times. Their life cannot move forward smoothly as other children's due to the traumatic events occurred at the age of seven" (Giri 1433).

To sum up, this novel *The God of Small Things* has thrown a flood of light on the repercussions of traumatic childhood on the rest of life, especially in adulthood. Roy has done a commendable job to win the sympathy of readers for the twins Estha and Rahel. Their traumatic childhood affects them and their traumatic memories keep on haunting them. Monika Agrawal rightly opines; "If they are bullied, blackmailed emotionally, isolated, and behaved trickily by grownups they get psychologically traumatized. They have been subjected to "psychological trauma that leaves deep unhealable scars on their bodies" (Agrawal 354). Estha and Rahel both are totally deprived of love and care. Their past memories never make them live in the present rather it always triggers their traumatic events. This made their life completely hell. They become desperate and emotionless. They have even lost the purpose of their life to live. Thus, Roy fully succeeds in exploring the traumatic childhood and its repercussions on the lives of Estha and Rahel.

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