

## Social Consciousness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Sonia, M.A., NET, Ph.D. Research Scholar

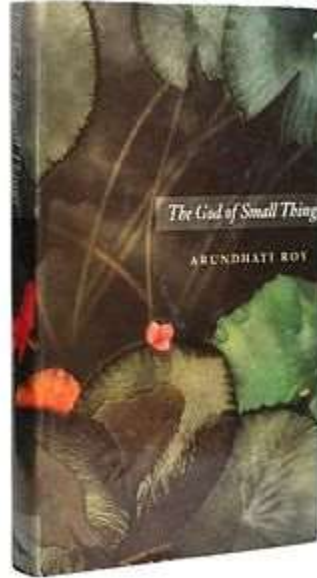
---

---

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:5 May 2013

---

---



### Extensive Reach of Indian Writing in English

Literature is an expression of the most intimate consciousness of life and society in which it grows and develops. It has some purposes to fulfill, some thoughts to be contemplated and some plans to be acted upon for the welfare of humanity. When it broods upon such different things, it witnesses changes taking place in life and society, and, therefore, these changes are reflected in literary works. In its corrective function literature projects the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistake and make amends. Indian English literature is also doing the same thing. It expresses thoughts, feelings and emotions in a rational and interesting manner, and directly or indirectly throws light upon different changes in its own way.

The Indian English literature from its very beginning has witnessed socio-cultural, economic and political changes in the life of the nation. Indian English novelists have been showing deep concern about these problems in the past also; in fact, a sustained level of involvement with social issues of caste and gender discrimination has marked the writings of

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

Sonia, M.A., NET, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Social Consciousness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

such writers as Mulkraj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Bhawani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Nargis Dalal, Ruth Praver Jhabwalla, K.A. Abbas, Nyantara Sehgal and others. Even now in spite of getting independence, the social issues are still there to be taken care of.

Today, when India is a democratic country, Indian English writers are now writing with a new zeal and confidence, blending social aspects and phenomenal situations in their literary works. To name a few, there are Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Deshpande, Jayant Mahapatra, and Namita, Ghokle, Amitav Ghosh, Jhupha Lahiri, Dina Mehta and Arundhati Roy.

### **Arundhati Roy's Writings**



**Arundhati Roy**

<http://outlookindia.com/peoplehome2.aspx?author/4112>

Arundhati Roy is known to all not only for her new and original style, but also for her thought-provoking attitude regarding social consciousness. Her debut novel *The God of Small Things* deals with, apart from other things, the universal theme of social consciousness, for example, confrontation between class antagonism and class exploitations, exposure of the tyranny and injustice against woman, child abuse, political bigotry, caste system, breaking of love marriages and above all, the trials and tribulations, the defenseless have to pass through in police custody and in a caste ridden social structure.

### **Focus of This Paper**

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

Sonia, M.A., NET, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Social Consciousness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

This paper shows how the internationally acclaimed writer Arundhati Roy who is deeply rooted in her native national culture highlights the political, social and cultural issues which constitute the very fiber of Indian life in her Booker Prize winner novel *The God of Small Things*. Ranga Rao, in his famous article. “The Book of the Year” rightly observes, “Roy’s book is the only one I can think of among Indian novels in English, which can be comprehensively described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities, small things, children and fourth, woman and untouchable” (17).

### **Attack on the Hypocritical Moral Code of Society**

Roy lashes out at the hypocritical moral code of society. It exposes the double standards of morality in society regarding men and woman. Chacko was sent to Britain to study further but Ammu was not allowed to do so. The reason is that she is a woman and so she has no right to go to college, because the college corrupts a woman, “Pappachi insisted that a college education was a unnecessary expense for a girl; She should wait for marriage proposals while she helped her mother with the housework. Since her father not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry” (Roy 38).

Even today, in spite of a fundamental improvement in woman’s status, one can see in the villages of India that the conservative and superstitious minds of a large number of people are against the higher education of girls.

### **Ammu’s Escape through Marriage**

The only escape for Ammu, from the oppressive atmosphere was through marriage. While taking a break at an Aunt’s place in Calcutta, she chanced upon a sober-looking Hindu Bengali from the tea estates in Assam, and without looking back stepped into matrimony. Simone de Beauvoir remarks:

There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband-or in some cases a ‘Protector’- is for her (woman) the most important

Undertaking... She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold, she will open up her future not only by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, in the hands of a new master. (352)

### **Release from the Marriage Bond**

The same happened with Ammu but she did not bow before this new master for a long time and got divorced. She returned to her parental home reluctantly. It is a great irony that a daughter estranged from the husband is tortured and tyrannized in the parent's house. But on the other hand an estranged son, Chacko, not only receives warm welcome but also remains the rightful inheritor of the family wealth and fortune, when he flirts with a low woman, he is encouraged by Mammachi in the name of "Man's needs," (Roy 268) whereas the love of Ammu with Valutha, a Paravan is termed as illicit, untraditional and sinful. Although Ammu works in the factory as Chacko does, legally she has no claim on property as out-dated and outmoded inheritance rights were weighted against her. So, Chacko always said, "what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (Roy 57).

### **A Great Champion of the Cause of the Dalit and Deserted Women**

Arundhati Roy, a great champion of the cause of the Dalit and the deserted women, points out those unnoticed shades of a social problem, which generally escape the eyes of social scientists. Valutha's grandfather Kelan, along with a number of other untouchables embraced Christianity. Even religious conversion fails to give the dispossessed an esteemed able status. Irrespective of religious affiliation the underdogs remains as fallen as ever in the dog-eat-dog-society:

When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans... converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of untouchability...it did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pain into fire they were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. After independence they found they were not titled to any Government benefits like job reservation or bank loans at low

interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore Castless. (74)

### **Caste Taboos in the Church**

It is also ironical that the church makes distinction between lower caste and upper caste. The caste taboos were still prevalent and not a part of India's past story:

Mammachi told... Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sway their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's time Paravans's like other untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, or allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed. ( Roy 73-74)

### **Caste Rigidity Everywhere**

It shows, in spite of long strides made in the field of technology and scientific knowledge, which caused major changes in the society, the caste hatred in our communities and the caste mindset has remained as rigid as ever. Valutha is a highly talented worker. He is a mechanic and a keen craftsman. However, his exceptional talents and skills, his keen understanding and deep sensibility did not get the respect from any one of those who were far less talented. People were awed by him, could not get over the fact of his being a Pravan, an untouchable. The cruel irrational orthodoxy didn't respect even a highly talented person. Mammachi is quite clear about how to draw lines:

To keep the others happy, and since she knew that nobody else would hire him as a carpenter, Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a Paravan. Mammachi didn't encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed) She thought he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and

allowed to touch the thing that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a Paravan (Roy 77).

### **Politics of Revolution**

Roy presents politics as a very complex force, operative, at different levels beginning with home, and manipulating different people for different ends. The novel focuses on the problems created by the deceptive roles played by the political radicals who have vowed to bring about a Marxist revolution to banish all exploitative systems and establish a society based on equality and respect for man as man. This is represented by comrade Pillai, a great political manipulator.

Comrade Pillai is indeed right from the beginning, an epitome of all the unpleasant deceptive aspects of a degenerate political tradition, which is nothing, more than a means of self promotion, maintaining one's hold over the citadel of local power, by playing one against the other. He pushes his devilish brain into plotting to trap poor Valutha and finally joining hands with state police in smashing him. In police custody Pillai doesn't even mention that Valutha is a member of the communist party. At another place the comrade is seen discussing with Chacko, the matter of Valutha's dismissal from the job. Pillai did it all because he considers Valutha as his future competitor in the party. Even after the death of Valutha, he did not hold himself in any way personally responsible for what has happened. He dismissed the whole business as the, "Inheritable Consequence of Necessary Politics" (Roy 14).

Valutha represents the class of the downtrodden used by the politicians and the police as mere pawns in the political game of chess. He refused to help Valutha when he needed him. Valutha stands betrayed by society, by his party, which has been seen by millions like him to be a substitute for religion.

### **Blatant Discriminatory Attitude of Police**

Roy ridicules the blatantly discriminatory attitude of the police whose basic duties of protecting the innocent and checking the criminal are blithely trampled upon by none other than the Inspector himself. He bullies the common citizens, leers at women, and connives with local politicians to trap and liquidate the untouchable Valutha. Roy spares no literary device to hit hard at the utter hypocrisy, cruelty and unscrupulousness of an administrative agency whose work is to protect the citizens from the violence of lawbreakers. Inspector Mathew's behavior with Ammu is totally uncivil. After Sophie *mole's* burial, when Ammu came to the police to tell the truth Mathew whose, "eyes were sly and greedy... stared at Ammu...He said the police knew all they needed to know and that Kottayam police did not take statements from Vashyas or their illegitimate children"(Roy 8 ).

Any government official can behave as Mathew does only when he is devoid of any sense of decency, and respect for women. This however, could be an occurrence, taking place every day in any corner in the country. Roy at several places uses the expression Touchable police, in order to remind the readers of its role in oppressing the untouchable as also the fact that its role in sustaining the caste based division of society. Here the lower classes are denied forcefully their basic rights to equality. In their chasing of Valutha, they show much alertness as if they were catching a terrorist:

Responsibility for the

Touchable future on their thin but able shoulders...They were not arresting a man; they were exorcising fear...Touchable police men acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy.

Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive... After epidemic they were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. ( Roy 307-309)

## **Love for Children**

Roy also throws light on the condition of the upbringing of children, especially of the divorced mother. The maltreatment of Rahel by men in Abhilash Tokies had great impact on her future life. The breakup of Ammu's marriage has its repercussion in the lives of her children.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:5 May 2013

Sonia, M.A., NET, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Social Consciousness in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

Baby Kochamma hates Estha and Rahel, “She was always keen for them to realize that they lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother’s house where they really had no right to be (Roy 45). Their willingness to love and to be loved raised manifold questions, whenever they came across glimpses of the boundless affection of Chacko hugging and kissing his stepdaughter Sophie *Mol*. But they did not get love from any family member. It’s Valutha who provided them love, care and company they needed so badly. But his subsequent brutal death in custody left one more everlasting scar on their memory.

Roy has been sociologically very sensitive while recording even the slightest stirs in their life. After being caught with Valutha, Ammu relegated them and blamed them as being responsible for all wrongs in her life. “If it weren’t for you I would be free. I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born. You were the millstones round my neck”(Roy 86). The words had a deep impact on the children’s psyche. And after that they decided to go away and hide which did show in their anguish when accompanying Sophie *Mol*. If Ammu had worked patiently, perhaps the children would not have decided to run and the death of Sophie would not have taken place.

### **Great Sociological Creativity**

All aspects considered together, the work evidences that Roy is the proud possessor of sociological imagination in the true sense of the term. The proof comes from her own words:

If you are a writer you tend to keep those achieving eyes open. Everyday your face is slammed up against the windowpane. Every day you bear witness to the Obscenity. Every day you are reminded that there is no such thing as innocence. And every day you have to think of new ways of saying old and obvious things, things about love and governance about power and powerlessness, about war and peace, about death and beauty. Things that must be said over and over again. (The Cost of Living 65).

*The God of Small Things*, quite in line with Roy’s statement, acknowledges the condition of the world around and that without any distortions and aberrations. A close reading of the



novel validates her statement. The post-sixties India is scanned on micro as well as macro structural levels. Ayemenem becomes a transforming world-in-miniature. The novel is spun on the very fabric of social stratification prevalent in society for several centuries.( The Week 46).

---

### Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Four Square Books, 1961. Print.

Rao, Ranga. "The Booker of the year" *The Hindu* (16 Nov, 1998): 13. Print.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. London: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.

"The Cost of Living" *Frontline* (18 Feb,2000): 65. Print.

*The Week* (26 Oct.1997): 46. Print

---

Sonia, M.A, NET, Ph.D. Research Scholar  
Department of English and Foreign Languages  
Maharshi Dayanand University  
Rohtak - 124001  
Haryana  
India [Soniaphougat8@gmail.com](mailto:Soniaphougat8@gmail.com)