

Arundhati Roy's
The God of Small Things:
The story and the storytelling

Review by Ramlal Agarwal

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, a debut novel, won the Booker Prize in 1997 and sold millions of copies all over the world. It was an extraordinary achievement for an Indian writer, and the readers of Indian writing in English were caught up in the euphoria and regarded it as a masterpiece, a novel of its own kind.

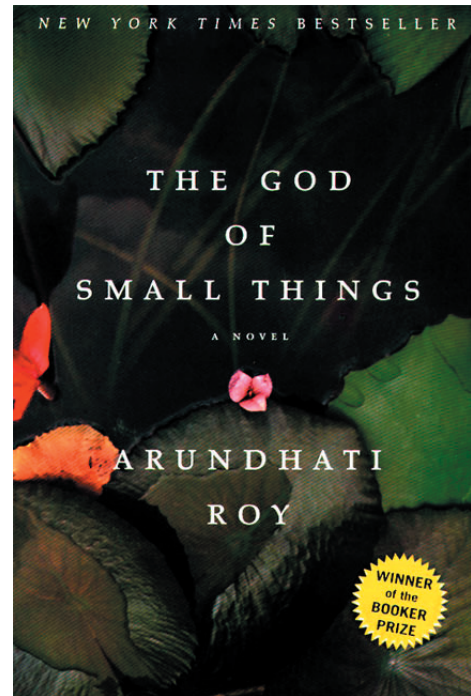
It is a novel that deals with people who cannot find their way in life. It is a story of three generations of a Syrian Christian family living in a small village in the south called Ayemenem.

The head of the family, Dr. Bennam John Ipe, is a retired government servant. His wife, Mammachi, runs a small pickle-making factory. Baby Kochamma, Bennam's sister, is in love with an English priest called Father Mulligan and spends eight years at a convent to win him over in vain and returns home completely heart-broken. Ipe's son Chacko is a Rhodes scholar. He fails the exam and takes to dishwashing. He marries a maidservant called Margaret. The marriage fails, and Chacko returns to Ayemenem to look after his mother's factory. His sister Ammu marries a Shillong-based labourer and gives birth to twins Estha and Rahel. Her husband receives a transfer to a tea farm in Assam and faces challenges. They quarrel, and Ammu returns to Ayemenem. Velutha, an untouchable youth, keeps visiting Ipe's house for odd jobs. He is very good at repairing furniture and leaking boats. He is friendly towards Ammu's twins and makes toys for them. Ammu feels drawn towards him, and they fall in love with each other. Ammu makes nightly visits to his hut, and Estha and Rahel see him during the day. In the meantime, Margaret and her daughter Sophie Mol come to Ayemenem for Christmas. Sophie Mol enjoys the company of Estha and Rahel and joins them on their trips to Velutha's place.

Unfortunately, one day their boat overturns, and while Estha and Rahel reach the shore safely, Sophie drowns. After Sophie's death, hell breaks loose on the IPE family.

Baby Kochamma vents her frustration on Velutha and implicates him in Sophie's death. Velutha is arrested and severely beaten in jail. Chacko comes to know of Ammu's love affair with Velutha and kicks her out of the house. Ammu seeks refuge in a nearby village. Estha and Rahel leave her in search of a job. Amy dies of grief.

The novel deals with issues of displacement, despair, and depressing social structure sprouting unhappiness around. These are by any reckon-



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ing formidable issues. Arundhati Roy deals with them in her very first attempt at novel writing and impressed the judges of the Booker Prize Committee and won the Booker Prize and also met with huge commercial success.

Clearly, at the time of its publication, what mattered most was the subject of the story. But, over a period of time, there has been a shift from the story to the storytelling. It is in this respect that readers find the novel disappointing.

Roy's storytelling disappoints because she shows no regard for the important elements of storytelling like characterization.

The reader gets uncomfortable with Roy's non-linear storytelling. It distracts the reader's focus and involvement with the narrative.

Another issue with her storytelling is her skimpy characterization. She gives almost no emotional life to her characters. She also does not contextualize what is happening to them. She just mentions Pappachi and Mammache, under whose roof the rest of the characters find shelter. She bypasses Chako's stay in England and merely mentions that he failed an exam, took to dishwashing, married a maidservant, was divorced, and returned to Ayemenem to join his mother's factory. Roy skips the childhood of Ammu and the circumstances that led to her marriage to a Shillong-based worker; she also does not delineate the character of Kochamma, who has been languishing with unrequited love. There is no description of the interaction between Margaret and Chacko's family.

The tragic love story of Velutha and Ammu is not highlighted properly, and its tragic effect is missing. The reader gets no insight into the issues the three generations of the Ipe family raise, but he is surely surprised when Roy ends her novel with an elaborate description of lovemaking between Velutha and Ammu and Estha and Rahel completely out of context. It unsettles him, and he starts wondering whether he has been reading a novel or non-fiction.