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NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND FRAGMENTATION: A STUDY OF CASTE VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA OF IDENTITY IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the plot and thematic issues in the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, and how the use of fragmented narration symbolizes the trauma and oppression of caste and the broken identity. Such a non-linear form of the novel reflects the psychological effect of traumatic memories among the characters like Estha, Rahel, Ammu and Velutha. The use of the past and present helps Roy to reveal the violence behind caste hierarchies and patriarchal standards of the postcolonial Indian society. This paper identifies the roles of narrative fragmentation, memory and silence as literary means of expression to show the emotional and social impact of caste-based discrimination and systemic injustice and ultimately constructs identity as being heavily informed by the trauma and structural injustice.

Keywords: Caste, Trauma, Identity, Fragmentation, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Essayist, Indian activist, and prominent author Arundhati Roy received the international literary attention with her first novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). The novel was widely acclaimed by the critics because of the innovative narrative approach and the audacious approach to the topics of caste hierarchy, colonial past, and the social strata of the Indian society. The outstanding literary work done by Roy was recognized when she was awarded the Booker Prize Fiction in 1997 and the novel became one of the most popular publications in the contemporary Indian English literature (Ranasinha 45). Along with literature, Roy has also become a strong and vocal intellectual and activist who writes extensively about the concerns of democracy, environmental justice, and social inequality in India (Tickell 63). A combination of her literary and political interventions makes her one of the most important figures in the modern cultural and political discussions. *The God of Small Things* is a story of a Syrian Christian family residing in a village called Ayemenem in South India, Kerala. Roy uses the dysfunctional Kochamma family to examine the various boundaries of caste, class, gender and

colonialism in postcolonial India. It has often been pointed out by scholars that the novel explores how firmly ingrained social hierarchies determine the identity of a person and the social bonds (Boehmer 118). Roy shows the way in which strict social conventions and institutionalized power formations divide the human identity and separate people of the society to create an ultimate emotional and psychological trauma.

The story is told in fragments and not in a linear manner. This disjointed narrative reflects the mental state of the characters, especially the twins Rahel and Estha, whose lives are colored by an unpleasant childhood experience. According to critics, the narrative structure by Roy can be compared to the mechanics of memory itself that is where the past and the present are repeatedly intertwined (Gopal 92). Rahel visits her homeland Ayemenem several years after tragedy that led to their separation and starts re-living the past through disjointed memories. The novel then switches between various time frame showing how memory re-assembles trauma and identity non-linearly. The very first sentence of the novel creates a mood and a tone of the story "May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid..." (Roy 1). Such descriptive allusions allow Roy to create the atmosphere that predetermines the tragic fate of the narration. As critics have been keen to point, the language used by Roy is very lyrical and poetical but behind this aesthetic beauty is a profound examination of violence, injustice and cruelty of society (Bose 78). The novel is then a form of poetic narration and fierce political criticism. One of the major ideas of the novel is the opposition between small things and big things. According to Roy, even the tiniest of situations (a glance, a touch, a silence) might have a deep emotional and social underpinning. These minor things undermine the grand things that a society creates like the hierarchy of castes, the morality of the patriarchy, and strict social rules (Tickell 69). The connection of Ammu, a divorced woman, and Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, turns out to be the strongest example of this conflict, whose relationship defies the "love laws" that govern who and how much one can love, "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much." (Roy 31). This idea of the Love Laws underlines authoritative practices in which the desire and social membership of individuals are managed by society.

NARRATIVE FORM AND NONLINEAR TIME

The God of Small Things by Roy uses a unique method of narration not following the standard chronological narrations. Arundhati Roy does not display the events in a chronological order but rather organizes the novel in the medium of fragmented memories that constantly switch between the past and the present. Critics note that the effect of the non-linear storytelling, wherein memories are not retrieved in a linear manner, is that of psychological trauma, where individuals are not recalled in a continuous series but rather in pieces and emotional flashes (Tickell 84). The narration of the story switches many times between 1993 when Rahel comes back to Ayemenem and the unfolding tragedy of 1969 which involved the death of Sophie Mol and the forbidden relationship between Ammu and Velutha. This time travel back and forth exhibits how the past, pitting the traumatic memories, still dominates the present (Ranasinha 71). In this way, Roy's form itself becomes a character - fragmented, poetic and haunted. The narrator writes: "It is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined." (Roy 16).

Roy also supports this traumatic structure by use of repetition and imagery disjunctions. Such phrases as "A viable, die-able age" re-appear all through the story, underlining the ghost of the death of Sophie Mol. Equally, the story about the abuse of Estha at the Abhilash Talkies is recounted in the petrified view of a child instead of a direct account in an expression of a psychological fragmentation (Bose 67). Also, when Rahel recalls her mother Ammu, Roy writes: "Her ashes. The grit from her bones. The teeth from her smile. The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot." (Roy 163) The fragmented words are used to show the way in which memory and identity is transformed through trauma. In this way, even the narrative of the novel is a personification of traumatic memory and emotional disintegration.

TRAUMA AND FRAGMENTED IDENTITY

In *The God of Small Things*, trauma can be viewed as an unseen but a constant power that defines the lives of the characters, their memoirs, and their identities. Arundhati Roy introduces trauma not as a state of the emotion but as an experience of structure that breaks the time, space, and identity. As scholars have observed, Roy has employed a narrative method that is indicative of the traumatic memory process of fragmentation, repetitiveness, and emotionality rather than being chronological or coherent (Tickell 92). The novel shows the way in which trauma can be entrenched in individual and collective memory through the experiences of Estha, Rahel, Ammu, and Velutha.

The incidence of sexual molestation in the restroom of Abhilash Talkies is one of the most traumatic moments in the novel that happens to Estha. The incident severely affects his psychological life and changes his identity and relations with language forever. Again, when the story provides a later reintroduction of Estha as an adult, he is nearly silent implying that he was traumatized to the extent that he was deprived of the ability to talk, to be a social being. Roy writes

"Estha had always been a quiet child, so no one could pinpoint with any degree of accuracy exactly when (the year, if not the month or day) he had stopped talking. Stopped talking altogether, that is. The fact is that there wasn't an 'exactly when'. It has been a gradual winding down and closing shop. A barely noticeable quietening." (Roy, 10)

This silence does not simply exist in the literal sense, but it is a withdrawal of self and the world. Critical thinkers view the silence of Estha as a figurative representation of traumatic repression when even words fail to explain pain (Bose 66). The fact that he wanders silently, is an additional highlight of his psychological isolation and lack of emotion.

Rahel is the twin sister of Estha and is also a representation of the outcomes of the unresolved trauma, but it is done in a different way. Although she is still outgoing and expressive, in her adult life, she is emotionally withdrawn and unstable. Her discontinuous identity can be seen in both her sleepless journeys between the cities of Delhi, Calcutta, and the United States and in the short-lived and emotionally detached marriage. This emotional driftlessness is what Roy describes by the metaphor: "Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge." (Roy 18). This symbolism brings out the fact that childhood trauma remains unresolved and still affects her life choices and identity as an adult. As critics state, Roy describes the relationship of Rahel and Estha as a psychic connection that is established due to the same trauma where words are not needed since their trauma is understood by both (Ranasinha 79). The aspect of trauma based on gender discrimination and caste prejudice in the life of Ammu is gender discrimination. Being a single mother in a traditional society, Ammu is already sidelined both in her family and the society. The intimacy with Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, directly opposes the strict social codes that govern intimacy and social order. Roy is known to refer to these oppressive rules as the Love Laws that dictate who is to be loved and how much. When Ammu disobeyed these laws, she ended up losing the entire social acceptance, her emotional isolation and finally her death. Her dilemma demonstrates how caste and patriarchy intertwine to disintegrate the identity of a woman and deprive her of her individuality. Roy is so sorrowful about the sad effort Ammu made to give some emotional security to her children. Her fragmented identity also demonstrates how caste and gender intersect to shatter a woman's identity. One of her lines – "She was their Ammu and their Baba. And she had loved them double." (Roy 163). This shows a woman's desperate effort to matter and lead a meaningful life and not merely maternal love. Trauma does not happen in linear time; this is the most important aspect of the novel. Roy has employed the fragmented, circular and haunting memory as a structure and characters move in continuous flashbacks. The house, courtyard, river and Ayemenem, everything becomes a memory-space, where trauma lingers silently.

CASTE AS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

The caste in *The God of Small Things* is not given only as a social stratification, but as a well-established, violent system, which informs the lives of the characters, their identities and dooms. Arundhati Roy describes the caste as the unseen limitations that border the social relationship and the boundaries of human interaction. Disregard of these boundaries has serious and, in most cases, deadly repercussions. The novel thus reveals caste as a structural violence that is not only practiced by physical torture but also by mental humiliation and institutional force. Roy illustrates that caste hierarchy is a mechanism that regulates love, identity, and social belonging of the postcolonial Indian society.

There is no stronger illustration of oppression of caste in the novel than the character of Velutha. Velutha is a Tibetan carpenter who is a Dalit (Paravan), a traditional untouchable caste. The society does not recognize his individuality despite his exceptional ability, intelligence and emotional sensitivity because his identity is determined by his caste alone. Roy can demonstrate the harsh truth of this bigotry by demonstrating how the skills of Velutha, his loyalty and human nature have no meaning after his caste identity is known. Even though he has been a diligent worker of the Ipe family over the years and is admired because of his skills, his social status is still unstable and conditional. He is accepted to the extent as far as he sticks to the strict boundaries of caste hierarchy. The very instant that he tries to step over these lines, the society turns him into a treasured laborer into a criminal with a gun. By this representation, Roy shows how caste devalues human dignity and makes a person a social stereotype.

The most radical opposition to this oppressive system is the relationship between Velutha and Ammu. Velutha gives Ammu- a divorced woman who is already at a marginalized status in her family- emotional relief and true love. Their relationship is against what Roy popularly refers to as the Love Laws, the unspoken rules of how, and who to love. Their affection thus turns out to be not just a personal emotional bond, but also a rebellious gesture against the social strictness that governs closeness and subordination. To Ammu, loving Velutha is both an individual decision and a way of revolting against the norms of the patriarchal and casteist society that limits her existence. But the social order cannot negatively accept this rebellion. The very fact of showing affection towards a Dalit man turns into a political offense in the society.

The relationship described between Ammu and Velutha is lyrical in intensity, but it is also an indication of the inability of both to be together in a caste-divided society. When they have physical union following this intense love, Roy writes: "He could do only one thing at a time. If he held her, he couldn't kiss her. If he kissed her, he couldn't see her. If he saw her, he couldn't feel her." (Roy 215). This is the scene that describes the emotional richness of their relationship and at the same time provides the hint of the tension and fear that surrounds their relationship. Their love turns into a form of protest to a system that does not give them the right to be in love freely. "If he touched her, he couldn't talk to her, if he loved her he couldn't leave, if he spoke he couldn't listen, if he fought he couldn't win." (Roy, 330) This moment is not just emotional; it is also metaphysical, which is a declaration of human protest against such a caste system. But, the society does not acknowledge this humanity and hence it is unacceptable to the society. Nevertheless, social order does not want to acknowledge their humanity, and their relationship eventually turns to be the reason why they have to be punished violently.

Baby Kochamma is important in imposing the moral caste authority in the novel. Being an embodiment of the old social principles and caste privilege, she views the relation of Ammu and Velutha as a risk of the family reputation and social status. Her reaction is not based on compassion or the truth but on the need to maintain the hierarchy of caste. Following the death of Sophie Mol, Baby Kochamma takes advantage to portray Velutha as a criminal falsely murdering and kidnapping a baby. Roy reveals with the help of her deeds the way in which caste bias can turn regular people into perpetrators of injustice. This is the most brutal form of caste oppression in the novel because the violence meted against Velutha by the police is savage in nature. The police that are expected to be the representation of law and justice are turned into the means of social domination instead. Velutha is brutally and ruthlessly beaten by the police, and his body is purposefully destroyed to teach a lesson to those who may be tempted to break the caste system. This violence is not merely a retribution to a purported wrongdoing but a ritualistic gesture that is supposed to strengthen the authority of the social order. Another explanation of the identity of Velutha by Roy underlines the irony and cruelty of the caste-based perception even more: "Velutha wasn't supposed to be carpenter. He was called Velutha – which means White in Malayalam – because he was so black." (Roy, 73) This statement is symbolic and the most agonizing illustration of how the caste system destroys the identity of a person.

The inability of political institutions to question caste oppression is also the subject of criticism in the novel. The Communist Party that claims to be a symbol of equality and social justice ends up abandoning Velutha once he turns socially inconvenient. Even though Velutha is immediately accepted as a Comrade Velutha, the Party then takes back its support after his affair with Ammu is revealed. The fact that Comrade Pillai refused to intervene shows how ideological movements do not address social prejudices. According to Roy political rhetoric on equality tends to fail when it comes to the facts of caste hierarchy.

The novel functions under the caste oppression which is played out through various institutions, among them, family, religion and politics, and the legal system. All these buildings work towards preserving the order and punishing those who question it. It is through this interrelated system of power that Ammu becomes socially isolated, Velutha dies and it is the cause of psychological trauma in both Estha and Rahel. The destruction of Velutha and the humiliation of their mother are observed by the twins and that moment of their childhood and emotional growth is forever changed.

CONCLUSION

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy gives very insightful criticism of the social constructs that condition and narrow human identity. Instead of reaching the sphere of a mere family tragedy, the novel reveals the multifaceted combination of caste, gender, trauma, and social expectations that define the fate of people. Roy uses the lives of characters like Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel to depict how the tight social structures slowly ruin individual freedom and emotional attachment. According to the story, people are not created as individual units of identity but are always molded by cultural and political systems that envelop them.

The character of Velutha gives the greatest criticism of the caste oppression in the novel. His relationship with Ammu is not just an act of personal emotional connection but an act of resistance to a very established social order. The romance between Ammu and Velutha is defiance against the strict laws of love, which determines the social hierarchy and governs the relationships between man and woman. Nevertheless, they violate these unwritten rules, which results in high punishment. Velutha gets murdered in a very unjust manner and Ammu gets a different but equally destroying fate, social isolation, being rejected and further dying. By this tragic event, Roy shows how caste hierarchy kills human dignity and is reprimanding those who want to dispute its power.

The nature of the character of Baby Kochamma is another way of showing the nature of social systems to hold on to their power through manipulation and fear. In her will to save family honor and caste privilege, she manipulates the truth and forces the children in her silence. This is not just because her actions cause the death of Velutha but also permanently affecting the emotional lives of Estha and Rahel. The silence of Estha along with the lack of emotional attachment demonstrated by Rahel depicts how childhood trauma still defines adult life.

In the later part of the novel, Roy gives a silent and personal moment that is subtle in criticizing the repressive systems that the characters are under. Instead of providing dramatic closure or political statement, the story ends in the poetic reflection that focuses on the emotional attachment and memory. This conclusion supports the major point Roy is making that resistance is not necessarily expressed through the form of open revolution. It can be in the little gestures of love and human compassion that sometimes challenge the social norms.

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