

**Panchatattva In Arundhati Roy's The God Of Small Things****Dr. Sushama Mishra****Asst. Prof. of English****Govt. Pt. Shyamacharan Shukla College Dharsiwa****Raipur****Email: [mishrasushma2301@gmail.com](mailto:mishrasushma2301@gmail.com)****Received:26August2020/Revised:10September2020/Accepted:16September2020/Published:26September2020**  
**Abstract**

The repetition of approximately the same sentence becomes a clue that gives the reader the means to interpret the incest as an act of defiance of the laws that led their mother to her death or, as a 'biological' necessity, love for the adults and a Siamese oneness for the twins. During the scene of incest that takes place between the twins the air is described as quiet as before a storm, "Except perhaps that it was a little cold. A little wet. But very quiet. The Air" (328). The other forbidden act of love between their mother and the untouchable man takes place in a calm environment before their deaths, "It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air" (338). The breaking of the love laws is the only means for the twins to revive the memory of their mother and to experience the grief that they had put away due to the guilt that their aunt had implanted in them as children.

**Keywords : Mother, Water, Fire, Earth**

The God of Small Things is a story about childhood experiences of twins whose lives are destroyed by the " Love Laws " prevalent in 1960s Kerala,India. Written by Arundhati Roy and published in 1997 vividly and poetically narrates the story of Velutha and Ammu.

The four elements are extremely important in Roy's novel. The author herself has declared that she has grown up close to nature; therefore it is only natural that nature's presence permeates the lives of the characters and reveals itself to participate in their very functioning, such as the twins' physical need for their river. These natural elements exist in a conflicting, opposing mode, the one destroying and the other saving or at least rehabilitating, underlining the tragedies lived by the main characters and serving the author's various purposes such as her political ones as revealed in her activism.

**Water**

The author's present crusading against the building of dams that would destroy the nature in her native country is a proof of the importance she gives this vital element. Water, by which the family's tragedies started, permeates the setting from the damp mud under Estha's shoes (15) to

the damp moss-grown walls (1) of the house, habit having rendered Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria indifferent to the filth and the decay around them. The paper of the letter, which accompanied Estha when she was returned (9), has grown soft due to the dampness in the air and indicates the state in which Estha's mind is, and above all, symbolises his fate which equals the letter's as his father has sent him back to get sucked in the quagmire of the antiquated house and its aged occupants.

The metaphor of rain as the "silver ropes ploughing up the earth like gunfire" on the very first page, is representative of Rahel's harsh revival of the bad memories in Estha's anaesthetised mind which awakes to the sounds of the outside world only when his sister comes back to Ayememen. It is Rahel's arrival that unearths the hidden stories under the official story, just as the rain ploughs the earth. Indeed, one learns that "It had been quiet in Estha's head until Rahel came. [...] The world, locked

out for years suddenly flooded in." (14-15, my italics) Ammu, Rahel and Estha love the river and love by the river which they use to live their various loves and lives. The twins are indeed tightly linked to the liquid element as their birth is described as an act of swimming into the world, "(swimming) through their lovely mother's cunt" (93) and continue to be at ease in this element as their Uncle Chacko teaches them to swim from a tender age, so that they know their limits in relation to this element.

Water is a central element in the novel, because it is felt as such by the twins, "water always helps" (108). It is the means to offer a psychological boost to a person crushed by traumatic events. The imagery linked to water and to the pattern of the lives of the little family also forms a narrative thread whether it refers to tragic events that undo the family, or whether it reveals that water is the element of comfort that they resort to when in anguish.

The four major characters are linked to each other through this liquid element. Velutha is described as belonging to the water world that is the river Meenachal (333) and Ammu licks the drops of the river off his body. The twins dream of their river (122). When Ammu indulges in moments of rare pleasure, she has midnight swims (44).

When they cross into forbidden territory where history is inscribed, they cross the river, a liquid border that separates their lives in a space where they are approximately carefree children to the other side where they witness horror. There is a parallel in the roles played between the mythological river Styx and the Meenachal. The belief that the dead had to cross some barrier

that divided the land of the living from that of the dead existed in many religions. The Greeks and Romans believed that the dead were ferried across an infernal river, the Acheron or Styx, by a demonic boatman called Charon, for whose payment a coin was placed in the mouth of the deceased, and Sophie Mol dies holding a silver thimble for luck in her clenched hand (251). Nevertheless this silver currency does not bring peace to the twins who accompany Sophie through this journey across the river that turns infernal. Their lives had come to an end even if they survived the boat accident, "Not Death. Just the end of living" (321).

The evocation of dams flooding (15) accompanies Rahel's return, for it brings back the unbearable memories which gush violently into Estha's mind after he had learnt to carefully shut the world out. But like the metaphor of rain unearthing reveals, her return brings with it a liberation which necessitates a passage through the pain that they had denied themselves by a feeling of guilt. Sophie Mol drowns in the water though as she does not really belong to this world as Estha and Rahel do. Sophie Mol who blackmails the twins into taking her with them, for she wishes to be part of their group, had in fact negotiated her own death. Her cruel fate reflects in a manner another instance of what seems to be reverse colonialism or the case of the issues of interracial marriages as developed under the title *Hybridity*. "The Western characters who come to exploit the native resources, also end up being engulfed by 'The Heart of Darkness'; Sai Karippeu dies a first time of love for his young native lover, and then a second time when his ghost is pinned to a tree by a sickle by Vellya Paapen. The tourists who come to profit of cheap hotels and ethnic ballets are in fact victims of a Mac-Donald's system but where neither the native nor themselves gain. Surrounded by the stench of the dying river where their countries invested money to help India and which in fact kills its natural resources, the tourists of the first world are surrounded by the ugliness resulting from their aid to third world countries.

Similarly, Sophie Mol who has a powerful position, "Loved from the beginning," forces the twins to take her with them to her own loss. The river, in a sense, appears to return the unkindness of the West by its cruelty.

### **Fire**

Fire is an important metaphor in the novel, and is mainly associated with loss and death. From the first chapter, the story or tragedy that is to be told is evoked in the image of burned, destroyed objects.

Perhaps it is true [...] that a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. [...] like

the salvaged remains of a burned house-the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. (32, my italics)

The house, the memories are also evoked as burned, charred objects, corpses. The inflatable goose, a toy, is significantly burned by a policeman's cigarette (91), putting an end to the twins' innocence. The innocent victims of marriages are likened to polished firewood by Ammu who sees the elaborate wedding preparations as a meaningless and useless effort, for her own experience of marriage was a short but intensely unpleasant one (44). Ammu's referring to marriage as being led to the gallows however applies less to her than to the victims of arranged marriages as she chose her husband. Arranged marriages are still a very common practice in India, coming after endless dowry negotiations and comparisons of horoscopes only to result in some cases in the 'accidental' burning of the bride if the total amount of dowry money is not paid. Every year, around 800 to 1000 women are 'accidentally' burned while cooking.

The cremation of Ammu is foreshadowed in the link between her own description of herself in the photograph of her wedding "Like polishing firewood" (44) and the narrator's description of Ammu on the day she and Velutha feel the attraction that proves fatal to them, "Her shoulders... shone as though they had been polished." (45)

The moths that appear "like strange ideas" and that burn themselves on baby Kochamma's bulbs that are dim, can be assimilated to the small, fragile, new ideas of Velutha, Ammu and her children and of their small attempts to change things in the traditional society they live in. On the other hand, the corpses of the insects that litter the floor to Baby Kochamma's and Kochu Maria's indifference indicate the number of lives sacrificed in order to preserve tradition. Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria are the two remaining representatives of tradition. Symbolically described as aged and physically repulsive, they are still alive after having consumed all around them. Indeed, the raging fire that Rahel observes when the furnace of the incinerator is opened refers to the cleansing Hindu rites, yet this incineration is practiced on a Christian woman. The incineration of Ammu's body like the Hindus is resorted to, not for religious reasons but because the society casts her away like a pariah containing a catching disease and that the other members of society should be saved from. The heat, the fire are likened to a beast (163) reminding us of the human sacrifices that were made to divinities in order to save the rest of the society. Thus one can assimilate caste fears to an ancient, irrational fear and the reaction to Ammu's choice to live as she intends to as superstitious and pointless.

## **Earth**

The most obvious metaphor is that of the Earth woman, against whose life man's life and destiny are paradoxically rendered more than insignificant as it is man who supposedly 'reigns' on earth. Yet, compared to earth's life, the whole history of humanity itself dwindles down from the length of time perceived in words like History, and Civilisation to a mere couple of hours in the life of the universe. The parallel between man's insignificance compared to earth can also be applied to an individual's life in comparison to the history of a nation, or a civilisation for the narrator painstakingly reveals the importance of the smallest details in an individual's life. This is how the narrator sets the his/story of an individual against the History of a nation to give more importance to the smallest things as they count more, like the happiness in dreams that can count if the dream brings real pleasure. Sophie Mol and all that she represents, through her belonging to the caste of the former rulers of India and to the rich first world, is reduced to dust by nature. "Dus to dus to dus to dus to dus" (7), even though the memory of her loss is kept alive and erases the lives of the twins. A dead U.K. child is kept 'alive' in the family's memories as she is considered more important than the Indian twins. Likewise, the toy watch, a symbol of another version of unrecorded history, is buried in the earth by the monsoon rains every year. Nevertheless, this means that whatever is out of sight is not forgotten but can be kept, preserved, and it is for the protagonists of each story to learn how to unravel every (sub)story and explain it by contrasting it against other histories. But the grown Rahel will set things right by 'bringing to life' a buried history from the very earth that concealed it.

As Eros and Thanatos are clearly revealed to be closely intertwined in this tale much more than any other, earth offers life and removes it. Ammu and Velutha's affair, the best proof of life and Eros, starts on a piece of earth, which seems to be prepared by the twins, "a boat-shaped patch of bare dry earth, cleared and ready for love." (336) So finally, there is some hope for Estha and Rahel, as the earth lets loose one of the buried secrets, thus joining the mood of the last pages that end on a hopeful 'tomorrow.'

## **Air**

Air as atmosphere generally envelops the characters in a negative way, underlining the unpleasant or dark side of the events. The image of the insects that burn themselves and transform the air, the atmosphere around an adult Rahel, "The Air smelled of something burning" (10) are evocative of the fate reserved to Ammu who was incinerated, reduced to ashes just as

anything that comes against Baby Kochamma's ideas and the traditions that the latter defends, traditions represented by her dim bulbs. The forty-watt bulbs are equally another metaphor for her mind which is fixed in an ancient order. When Ammu snubs Margaret Kochamma when the latter reveals her ignorance and tendency to stereotype Orientals, the animosity between Ammu and her brother fills the air. "But the Waiting Air grew Angry." (179)

The twins, like Velutha, merge with the natural elements as the following quote reveals. Estha, who as soon as they return from the airport goes into the factory to prepare himself in case he is tracked down by his molester, fuses the atmosphere with his fear and the need to prepare himself. This atmosphere is perceived and reflected by Rahel who feels from inside the house that her brother is waiting for her. Outside, the Air was Alert and Bright and Hot. Rahel lay next to Ammu, wide awake.... She could hear the blue cross-stitch after-noon [...] and Estha waiting for her. (201)

Rahel is thus in total symbiosis with the well-known nature around her and thus can "hear" her brother waiting for her just as she feels the other happenings that are enumerated, and when she joins him, they find the boat together which indicate their keen sensitivity to their surroundings and especially to each other.

The repetition of approximately the same sentence becomes a clue that gives the reader the means to interpret the incest as an act of defiance of the laws that led their mother to her death or, as a 'biological' necessity, love for the adults and a Siamese oneness for the twins. During the scene of incest that takes place between the twins the air is described as quiet as before a storm, "Except perhaps that it was a little cold. A little wet. But very quiet. The Air" (328). The other forbidden act of love between their mother and the untouchable man takes place in a calm environment before their deaths, "It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air" (338). The breaking of the love laws is the only means for the twins to revive the memory of their mother and to experience the grief that they had put away due to the guilt that their aunt had implanted in them as children.

Only that once again they broke the love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (328)

The dampness of the monsoon air in Ayemenem seems to permeate the memories and take the harshness off certain events, so that memories can at last be let loose as with the passing of time they seem to have lost their cutting edge. Yet, this air also reveals the mushy condition into

which the weight of memories has put the house in, from the memory of Sophie Mol's loss:

The paper had grown soft, and folded like cloth. She had forgotten how damp the monsoon air in Ayemenem could be. Swollen cup-boards creaked. Locked windows burst open. Books got soft and wavy between their covers. (9)

Never has setting been so intimately linked to its story and characters. As Roy herself has claimed that her writing is deeply affected by her life in Ayemenem's nature as a child<sup>1</sup>, one can understand the symbiotic link and narration of the twins' lives in the novel with that of the nature around them.

### **Works –Cited**

1. 'I'd never have guessed the book I'd write would be so full of earth, water, sky, insects. It's a surprise; there's so much underlife in the book. On every page, there's a god of small things. I love the earth there, and the landscape, with an emotion I find hard to understand myself. I remember everything—the smells, the fishing—so clearly, it's scary.' qtd. Maya Jaggi
2. Roy, Arundhati . *The God Of Small Things*, London : Flamingo, 1997
3. *Maya Jaggi, "An Unsuitable Girl," Electronic Mail & Guardian. Review of Books.*