

Unsuccessful, Weeping and Estranged Characters in The God of Small Things

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Abstract: The God of Small Things(TGST) by Arundhati Roy is a wonderful presentation in black and white of the real life situations of the middle and lower middle class people. Success is a measuring tape by which we measure the length of happiness of a person. All the characters in the God of Small Things, characters directly related and indirectly related to the main story are unsuccessful in their business or bread earning activity, unsuccessful as lovers, unsuccessful as husband, wife, weeping at heart, though not actually seen as shedding tears and all are estranged from their so called near and dear ones. They do not have near and dear ones at all. Near, they all are of each other as they live under one roof but dear they are not of each other. They are only physically near but with no concern, for each other. Some due to their own doing, some due to their bad luck, some due to the revengeful act of others-they are all in the dark pit of unhappiness, failure and loneliness.

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In the God of Small Things, Roy has shown that no external agency, no outside force inflicts, pain and suffering on the characters. They are their own enemies. It is just because they cannot move out or circumstances have forced them to live together. Otherwise, they are, in reality, no better than distant relatives, distanced for ever from each other. What is the use of physical nearness if there is no concern, no sense of responsibility? Such is the situation in The God of Small Things. All characters in their own way, so individual and so wonderfully portrayed by Roy, that they stand apart. Though the common thread running between them all is there bad luck, their problem of being abandoned, their miserable condition, yet they are recognizable as individuals. This is Roy's artistic way of pen sketching. It is a fiction closer to fact. It is so well grounded in fact that the readers feel that it is just a next door neighbour's suffering. The female characters in the story are Mammachi, Baby Kochamma forming their generation-wise pair. Ammu, Margaret Kochamma the next generation pair. Rahel and Sophie Mol, the third generation pair.

The male characters are Pappachi, Chacko his son, Velutha the mechanic cum servant cum coconut supplier. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are the sisters – in – law of each other, of nearly the same age. Baby Kochamma is unmarried. In her youth, she fell in love with father Mulligan. She made all out efforts to “Seduce Father Mulligan, “with weekly exhibitions of staged charity.” She would ask for explanations and clarifications from him on her bogus biblical doubts. This however proved to be of no use as Father Mulligan left for Madras “Since charity had not produced any tangible results, the distraught young Baby Kochamma invested all her hope in faith. (p.24 – TGST)

She becomes a Roman catholic. Her's is an unrequited love. She is estranged. Her heart weeps. Baby Kochamma defies her father's wishes, becomes a Roman catholic and enters a convent in Madras as a trainee novice. She yearns to be close enough to Father Mulligan. “Close enough to smell his bread.” To love him just by looking at him. (p.24 TGST) Very soon she realizes that this cannot go on for a long time. She starts writing puzzling letters to her father as koh-i-noor about her starvation in the convent. Her father withdraws her from there. To compensate and to prevent her from becoming a brooding type, her father sends her to Rochester in U.S. for a diploma in ornamental gardening. On her return, she maintains her garden but soon with the arrival of television sets, forgets her garden, lets her plants go dry and throws to the winds her love for gardening. Estranged gardener and the abandoned garden.

. She returns that treatment to all other family members as well.. She has no concern for her brother's wife Mammachi, niece Ammu, nephew chacko, and Ammu's children Rahel and Esha. She is unsuccessful as a lover, estranged because her love for Father Mulligan failed to consummate therefore though not actually shedding tears is still weeping at heart. . The next member of the generation is Mammachi. She is the wife of the imperial entomologist Pappachi. She enjoys no dignity, no respect from her husband. A highly qualified man that Pappachi is, generous for others but a savage brute for her. Mammachi is good at making pickles and Jams but is a victim of Pappachi's jealousy. Even after his retirement he does not help his wife in the pickle making and selling business. All that he does is supervise her work.

“Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren’t new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place. one night Pappachi, broke the bow of Mammachi’s violin and threw it in the river. (pg47 – 48 TGST). One day Chacko happens to notice this. He interferes and after that “for the rest of his life” he never touched Mammachi again. But when he needed anything, he used kochumaria or Baby Kochamma as intermediaries.” (p-48 TGST)

The love, the affection from husband, Mammachi never receives in her life. She is an estranged person. Even the servant is preferred over her. How sad and unfortunate ! “ At Pappachi’s funeral Mammachi cried and her contact lenses slid around in her eyes.”(pg 50 TGST).It is said that charity begins at home but neither Pappachi nor Baby Kochamma has in their hearts any charitable feelings for Mammachi. What were Pappachi’s expectations from her that she failed to fulfill, we do not know. It can only be assumed that she was a failure as a wife. She was good at making pickles but it was below the dignity of Pappachi to join hands with her. She is thus a failed business woman and an estranged wife. As Sangeeta Das rightly remarks, “In Indian society, woman is always placed second to a man, no matter whatever height she may score”. Such is truly the fate of Mammachi

The female characters of the next generation are Ammu and Margaret Kochamma. They are equally unsuccessful in love and in their married life. They too are estranged and weeping at heart.

Ammu is the daughter of Mammachi and Pappachi and sister of Chacko. She is deprived of higher education by her qualified father. She is at home helping her mother and waiting for marriage proposals come her way. Since her father has not saved enough money for her marriage, no respectable proposals come her way. Her life before marriage is simply hellish, horrible. The bad temper of Pappachi does not allow her any happy days before her marriage. She, like Mammachi, can never predict when the two would suffer at the hands of Pappachi.He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning,(pg 180 TGST)

“Ammu had endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in the Mehndi hedge around their house (in case people from Good Families saw them) because Pappachi had come back from work out of sorts and beaten her and Mammachi and driven them out of their home.”

This is her very unfortunate childhood that her father made her suffer the envy of friends and relations for having a wonderful father and a wonderful husband for their mothers.

“As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold calculating cruelty.” (p-181, TGST)

She finds a man to be her husband at a relative’s marriage reception in Calcutta which she happens to attend. She knew that her husband to be was not right for her or whom she could love but nonetheless he was thousand times better than her father.”She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn’t reply.(pg 39 TGST). Bad luck does not like to leave her company. It follows her like her shadow. The man whom she marries is a through alcoholic. To save his job he is ready to offer Ammu to his boss Mr Hollick, for night company. She is” An extremely attractive wife”(pg42TGST)

Very soon, that is, after the birth of her twins she leaves her husband because it is beyond her tolerance level now to tolerate him. She is not welcomed, nobody is happy to see her safe and sound and nobody is sorry that her marriage fell on the rocks. Pappachi would not believe her story.(pg42TGST)Nobody loves her twins- a daughter-Rahel and a son-Estha

Thus Ammu is estranged at her maternal place. She is just another outsider for them. Her life at Ayemenem is a next chapter full of unfortunate events in store for her. All three of them are unwelcome, Nobody bothers to talk to them or share their grief. Baby kochamma is, in particular, very sad at the arrival of Ammu. “Ammu left her husband and returned unwelcomed to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams.” (p-42 TGST). Her love affair with Velutha the Paravan whom Mammachi employs whenever she need his service, drives the final nail in her coffin. She yearns for the physical company of Velutha. “ It was this that grew inside her and eventually led her to love by midnight the man her children loved by day.” (T-44 TGST)

Her life is horrible after it becomes known that she enjoys a Paravan. She goes on losing jobs after jobs. She is a veshya meaning a prostitute according to Kottayam police. A prostitute because she loves a Paravan. Her last days are extremely sad. It becomes very difficult to read the description. She dies in a lodge away from her children and family. Her body is not brought home. Nobody mourns her death. She leaves the world unwept, unhonoured and unsung. What was her fault? why was she not given good education, why did her father not take upon himself his responsibility of getting his daughter married? Whose responsibility was it then to take care of her and her children after her divorce? These are unanswered questions.

Ammu dies in a “grimy room in the Bharat lodge in Alleppey where she had gone for a job interview as some one’s secretary. She died alone.” ...in the strange bed in the strange room in the strange town.” The Church refused to bury Ammu. (pg161 – 162TGST) How sad!, how unfortunate!. So badly estranged, always weeping at heart and nothing and nobody to console or soothe her heart. The next character of Ammu’s age is

Margaret Kochamma. She is the ex-wife of Chacko. He meets her at a café in Oxford where she was working as a waitress. Her family lived in London. She moves out and away from them thus estranges herself from her family to assert her independence. She happens to meet Chacko there, falls in love with him and without any parental consent, marries him. Her father refuses to attend her wedding with Chacko because, "He disliked Indians, he thought of them as sly, dishonest people" (P-240 TGST) "Margaret Kochamma's parents refused to see her" (p-247 TGST). She gives birth to a baby girl whom she names Sophie, Sophie Mol. Very soon she makes a place in her mind and heart for a biologist Joe and divorces Chacko. He according to her is not the right man for her. She leaves Chacko alone and keeps Sophie Mol to herself. As destiny had something different written for her, Joe dies in an accident and she is left alone. It is Chacko who feels that she should be asked to visit Ayemenem for a change to help her overcome the grief. In her short stay at Ayemenem, Sophie Mol dies accidentally of drowning and she is all alone. "When Margaret Kochamma saw her little daughter's body, shock swelled in her like phantom applause in an empty auditorium. She mourned two deaths, not one. She had come to Ayemenem to heal her wounded world, and had lost all of it instead. She shattered like a glass".(pg 263 TGST) Thus each and every character in the story is destined to live and die alone. During her stay at Ayemenem, Mammachi takes great care that Margaret Kochamma does not resume her sexual relationship with her son Chacko because she regarded Margaret Kochamma as just another whore." (p-169 TGST). Family members are greater perpetrators of pain and suffering on each other.

The third generation characters are Rahel and Sophie Mol

. Rahel, the twin sister of Estha, daughter of Ammu is in fact, the narrator of the story. She was born eighteen minutes after Estha. Her father Baba was so drunk at that time that he lay "stretched out on a hard bench in the hospital corridor, was drunk." (p-41 TGST) As a daughter, she has never enjoyed her father's company.

Rahel stores in her memory all that has happened in Ayemenem. The story is her own narration in flashback during her second visit to that place after twenty-three long years. As Nirzari Pandit rightly remarks, "The story which encompasses three generations is seen through the stream of consciousness of Rahel who has witnessed the tragedy which overtook the Ayemenem House. Several years later, she returns to the house because her twin brother Estha is re-returned. She relives mentally the events of her childhood.

Ammu divorces her husband Baba and after that Rahel never ever goes to him. Estha goes and stays with him after Sophie Mol's tragic death but Rahel never goes. She is not called. Rahel is permanently estranged from her father. "After Ammu died (after the last time she came back to Ayemenem, swollen with cortisone and a rattle in her chest that sounded like a faraway man shouting), Rahel drifted. From school to school. She spent her holidays in Ayemenem largely ignored by Chacko and Mammachi. They provided the care (food, clothes fees) but withdrew the concern.(pg 15 TGST)

Rahul and Estha are blamed for Sophie Mol's sudden tragic death Rahel is estranged. She has lost her mother, her brother is separated from her and it is a long period of separation of almost twenty-three years. "The loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive. It ushered Rahel through childhood (from school to school) into womanhood." (p-16, TGST). There was no body to bring up Rahel, to play with her in her childhood. She did not see her parents together. At maternal grandparents home, when all three of them are together, they are treated almost like a football. When she grows up, she fails to concentrate.

She is so distracted, her mind so full of, so overcrowded with memories of her childhood that her husband, Larry Mccaslin does not understand her. She is unsuccessful as a wife. Even as a student at school she was beyond her teacher understands. At the college of Architecture, she has no friends, teachers fail to understand her. She is unsuccessful in her work place—first as a waitress then as a night clerk in the gas station. Before returning to Ayemenem after a long gap of time, she has left her job and divorced her husband. She is unsuccessful and estranged. Baby Kochamma does not want to take the responsibility of Estha so she informs Rahel but is not happy to see the innocent, estranged children back there.

The Silence sat between grand niece and baby grand aunt like a third person." (p-21 TGST) .Sophie Mol is the third generation female character in the story. She is the daughter of Chacko and Margaret Kochamma.. At a very tender age she is separated from her biological father Chacko and very soon after that her new father Joe also dies in an accident. She comes to Ayemenem to spend some time with her natural biological father and her mother. Nobody except fate knows that it is her very short trip to that place. She accidentally dies of drowning. She dies and disaster falls on Ammu, Rahel and Estha as they live life in death after that. They are held responsible for Sophie Mol's death. Estrangements, Failure, Grief, Suffering are the shadows following all the characters in the story. The male members too have these shadows following them. The first male member of the older generation is Pappachi. He has failed in proving that he discovered a moth." After six unbearable months of anxiety, to Pappachi's intense disappointment, he was told that his moth had finally been identified as a slightly unusual race of well known species that belonged to the tropical family Lymantriidae.

The worst part comes when, after his retirement the department of Entomology, acknowledges the moth identified by him as a separate species but the credit of discovery is taken by his junior whom he disliked.

Thus it is his personal failure. Though a family man, he is not happy in the company of his wife, son daughter. They suffer at his hands. He is responsible for his own estrangement. He is a failure as a husband and father also. What he gives to them comes back to him. He gives hatred, hatred comes back to him.

The next generation male member of the family is Chacko. A thorough libertine, he has his 'man's needs.' (p-168 TGST). As a son of Pappachi and Mammachi, he has not received any love and affection from his ever quarreling parents. He has no attachment for his sister Ammu. He goes to Oxford for higher studies but is not successful there. "It usually took Chacko between eight and ten days to assemble the aircraft with its tiny fuel tank and motorized propeller" (p-56 TGST). His planes crashed. At Oxford, he meets Margaret Kochamma the waitress in a café. He marries her without parental consent. After the birth of their first baby Sophie, the two separate. Failure in studies, estrangement in family is what all the character suffers from in *The God of Small Things*.

As a son also Chacko is not successful. Mammachi loves him more than Ammu but he punishes her in secret ways. "But of all the secret punishments that Chacko tormented Mammachi with the worst and the most mortifying of all was when he reminisced about Margaret Kochamma." (p-249 TGST)

There are no external agencies inflicting pain and suffering and the pangs of separation, humiliation on the characters. They are each other's enemies.

Estha is the third generation male member at the Ayemenem home, twin brother of Rahel and son of Ammu and Baba. After Sophie Mol's funeral Estha was returned to his biological father Baba in Calcutta. Estha remains a mediocre boy in school and refuses to attend college. Estha is quietness personified. Most unlike boys of his age he is not naughty, he never knows what fun is, what is enjoyment, what is movie watching in a theatre with friends. Very pathetic! In Calcutta he suffers from Estrangement. "Slowly, over the years, Estha withdrew from the world. (p-12 TGST). Other character suffering from loneliness are comrade Pillai the communist party worker. "He lived alone now. His wife Kalyani had died of ovarian cancer. His son Lenin had moved to Delhi where he worked as a service contractor for foreign embassies." (p-14 TGST).

Velutha, the Paravan is an untouchable lives with his one eyed father and paralysed brother. He has lost his mother some time back. Though an expert technician lives an unsuccessful life at the mercy of Mammachi. He would have got a good job outside Ayemenem but he lives there and as destiny wishes dies an unfortunate tragic death in police custody. His crime was that he loved Ammu, the higher caste girl and a mother of twins. Although it is not a one sided affair, society cannot digest it. "It was Velutha who made Rahel her luckiest ever fishing rod and taught her and Estha to fish." (p-79 TGST). He was the man whom the children loved by day and their Ammu at night.

He is punished by the society for being an untouchable and loving selflessly. The Kottayam police "woke Velutha with their boots" (p-308 TGST)

His spine was damaged in two places; the concussion had paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered." (p-310 TGST)

Velutha dies such a tragic death. Thus all the characters of all the three generations, the female, the male the touchables, the untouchables, all are unsuccessful, estranged and weeping alone, They are the victims of each other's jealousy, bad temper, bad habits. No external agency, no fate or no pre-destined plan.. It is their own doing that makes them so.

By way of conclusion, it would be appropriate to quote Chacko's opinion on the state of affairs. "Our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves." (p-53 TGST) The family alienates the family members.

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