

## Reading the Language of Children in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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### **Abstract**

*Language is considered to be more than a mere means of communication by the postcolonial critics. Language holds a person's understanding of the world as well as reveals the inner workings of that person. This paper takes Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as a sample of this postcolonial trait of language. Roy uses language to open the windows of her child protagonists' minds. A close reading of the text enables the researcher to appreciate the use of children's language in this text to understand their innocent world and also how they see the experienced world of the adults.*

The use of language and the nonlinear narrative are among the most striking features of Arundhati Roy's Booker winning novel *The God of Small Things*. The unmistakably innocent, yet deceptively simple, language accompanied by the fragmented structure, continual use of flashback and flashforward make this debut novel of Roy's an unconventional one. As the Booker prize Selection Board chairperson, Gillian Beer, stated: "With extraordinary linguistic inventiveness, Arundhati Roy funnels the history of south India through the eyes of seven-year-old twins. The story she tells is fundamental as well as local: it is about love and death, about lies and laws. Her narrative crackles with riddles and yet tells its tale quite clearly. We were all grossed by this moving novel" (qtd. in Glaister).

The tale tells the personal tragedy of the protagonists, Rahel and Estha, and their loved ones, that took place twenty three years ago. While the very first chapter maps out the major events of the story, the rest of the book unfolds the backdrops that led to these occurrences. A close reading of *The God of Small Things* reveals two trails of narratives in the story: one of the child protagonists' simple style—the childish narrative, and the other of the omniscient narrator's. In other words, Roy employs two perspectives to tell the same story in alternating narrative threads. In fixed, unmarked English, the narrator reports some events, whereas the story mainly proceeds through the twins, especially Rahel's, playful, spontaneous, innocent telling of experiences. Of these two linguistic worlds, this essay focuses on the language of the twins to explore their ideas of the outside adult world. How Roy explores children's perception and response to the world through their use of language is the main concern here.

*The God of Small Things* is a story of innocent childhood and the disruption of that innocence when it comes in contact with the adult world of experience. Ritu Menon, in her book review, states that Roy depicts "The fear of it, the terror and love of it, the deep scars it leaves ... the gradual contamination of relationships by the perfidy of the adult world is exquisitely presented through a series of vignettes and revelations" (1). All the windows of the children's world are opened through the use of their playful language, choice of words, linguistic features like neologism, similes, metaphors, irony, imagery, personification, symbolism, etc, or sudden

unusual capitalization of letters. They are found to read and speak backwards. Their words run into each other or sometimes are broken apart. In their distinct linguistic world single words are sometimes important enough to make a paragraph. As Anna Clarke explains, “The twins, like most children, play with language; they enjoy making up words and breaking rules of grammar, and they cherish the sound of words without even knowing their meaning” (134).

Like most children, Rahel and Estha, the seven year old twins, look into the world from a rational point of view. And the language is no exception in this process of rational filtering. They like to have reason and logic in language as well. For example, when they come to know of “cuff-links,” they like the logic of its structure. “When the twin asked what cufflinks were for—‘To link cuffs together,’ Ammu told them—they were thrilled by this morsel of logic in what had so far seemed an illogical language. Cuff + link = Cuff-link”(Roy 51). But it is not what they always find in adult language. For instance, the “bellboy” in an adult language is not necessarily a boy, nor is it mandatory for him to have a bell. Once they observe an ambulance named Sacred Heart Hospital. The irony lies in the fact that it is full of a party of people on their way to a wedding! (60).

The use of different figures of speech serves multiple purposes in the twins’ language. Sometimes similes are applied to reveal the children’s attitude towards others, sometimes they tell us the inner agonies of a neglected child, or at times they are only meant to poke fun. The description of dead Sophie Mol by Rahel lets us know of her incapability to grasp the gravity of the tragedy: “Her face was pale and as wrinkled as a dhobi’s thumb from being in water for too long” (4). She reveals her belief that Sophie Mol is not really dead and also she is showing “a small black bat” baby to Rahel. Estha’s portrayal of the “Orangedrink Lemondrink Man,” even before this man abuses Estha, makes his disgust known to the reader: “His gold wristwatch was almost hidden by his curly forearm hair. His gold chain was almost hidden by his chest hair .... He looked like an unfriendly jewelled bear”(102). The discrimination practiced by the adults in dealing with the children affects their psychology. They can sense the negligence even if it is not stated. Rahel smells the carelessness for her in the atmosphere when the full family greets Sophie Mol: “Rahel ... saw that she was in a Play. But she had only a small part. She was just the landscape. A flower perhaps. Or a tree. A face in the crowd. A townspeople. Nobody said Hello to Rahel” (172). Unlike adults, the preferred kid also dislikes the unnecessary show of affection. And this similitude brings them on the same platform in no time. Sophie Mol refuses to be the replacement of Estha and Rahel in Mammachi’s service. She also “not just rejected, but rejected outright and extremely rudely, all of Baby Kochamma’s advances and small seductions” (189). Her tears to be allowed within the twins’ world made her “human” in their eyes. This feeling of the twins indicates that the adults’ extraordinary treatment of Sophie almost turned her into a superhuman in the eyes of the other kids and made her lonely for the time being.

The text also brings to light the children’s quality to find fun in things that adults do not ever think of. The “orangedrink” man’s teeth are like “yellow piano keys” (188), Kochu Maria is “vinegar-hearted” (185) and “Baby Kochamma rose between them like a hill” (62). The manner in which the beauty conscious Baby Kochamma is described also reveals the children’s ability

to poke fun: “Baby Kochamma was holding on to the back of the front seat with her arms. When the car moved, her armfat swung like heavy washing in the wind. Now it hung down like a fleshy curtain, blocking Estha from Rahel” (62).

The way the kids twist language also becomes a source of irony for the serious adult world. Pappachi’s moth, that could have been the source of his extreme success, becomes associated with Rahel’s bad and ominous feelings: “On Rahel’s heart Pappachi’s moth snapped open its somber wings. Out. In. And lifted its legs. Up. Down” (293). Another irony is that the lists of things important and unimportant are largely different in children’s and adults’ worlds. The maltreatment of a kid, separation of siblings, or detachment of a child from his mother “are only the small things” (3) in adult realization. On the other hand, these are events important enough to ruin the total course of the children’s lives. Sharma and Talwar write that:

a sensitive and thoughtful re-reading of the text will reveal that the deceptive statement has a profound significance. What are almost insignificant things from the larger point of view - a child’s sexual abuse and his separation from his mother—are in fact, cataclysmic; .... (21)

Roy’s mastery lies in the fact that she can comprehend things from a child’s perspective. The children’s language she uses enables her readers to grasp that perception as well. The visual images that her child protagonists refer to, on many occasions, bring to light the unpleasantness of the adult world. The unhealthy fights between parents have a universally acknowledged effect on children: “they remembered being pushed around a room once, from Ammu to Baba to Ammu to Baba like billiard balls” (84). Rahel is pleased when Chacko is mistakenly thought to be her father. She wants to be a part of a normal family (79). Their longing to have a father figure in their lives is also evident when they pretend like “clerks.”

At times their imagery is only to assert their innocence: “A pale daymoon hung hugely in the sky and went where they went” (87).

Society, religion, and humanity—all heavyweight sectors are lifeless, valueless, or meaningless to the child’s innocent mind when Rahel finds their cruelty after her mother’s death. Ammu and her twins are already abandoned by society: “Though Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them” (5). After Ammu’s death, the church refuses to bury her and so her body has to be cremated. The description of the cremation of Ammu by her left alone daughter, Rahel, is one of the most violent blows on the face of the pretentious society:

The heat lunged out at them like a famished beast. Then Rahel’s Ammu was fed to it. Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice. The way she used Kipling to love her children before putting them to bed: We be of one blood, ye and I. Her goodnight kiss. ... All this was fed to the beast, and it was satisfied. She was their Ammu and their Baba and she had loved them Double. (163)

The outside world, people living in it—everything becomes insensible or worthless in the child’s mind when it encounters such unkindness from them. The evil and corruption of the social institutions are brought to light by the seemingly innocent languages of the

child protagonists of Roy. Rahel's imagery opens the mask of fake humanity around her: "Outside the van windows, people, like cut-out paper puppets, went on with their paper puppet lives" (162).

One striking feature of the children's language is their habit of reading or speaking backwards. In their own world they frequently use this reversed style. In this childish game they have discovered different palindromes. For instance, "Malayalam" and "Madam I'm Adam" can be read both backwards as well as forwards. However, this playfulness does not touch a representative of the adults, Miss Mitten. She thinks she has seen Satan in their eyes: "nataS in their seye" (60). This habit of the twins may indicate their unconscious longing to reverse the events of their lives. Their reading backwards in the police station hints at the backward moving condition of this authority of justice. Politeness, Obedience, Loyalty, Intelligence, Courtesy, and Efficiency are all the qualities to be assembled by the police. But in reality, the police have "broken" a "technically innocent man."

The child protagonists' naive reporting of some adult language or behavior is actually the irrationalities of the adults that the innocent mind cannot grasp. While greeting Margaret and Sophie, Baby Kochamma uses a "strange new British accent" and gives references to Shakespeare. Rahel thinks that "All this was of course primarily to announce her credentials to Margaret Kochamma. To set herself apart from the Sweeper Class" (144). Class and caste are again some unfathomable factors of the adult world that the children can neither understand nor bother to abide by. They are forbidden to go to Velutha's house as he is an "untouchable." Nevertheless, it is Velutha that the children take as a friend, dream of as their father figure. In this regard, Arundhati Roy's perception of the superior privileged class people can be seen. In an interview with Amitava Kumar, Roy said: "There is something clerky and calculating about our privileged classes. They see themselves as the State or as advisors to the State, rarely as subjects."

The apparently childlike reports of different events by the twins are at times food for some deeper thought. Six policemen's approach to arrest Velutha is immediately followed by an innocent remark that they are the "servants of the State" since the children can sense the "dark of (their) Heart" (304).

Roy uses the kids' judgment to bring out the social discrepancy between a son and a daughter in the questions of inheritance. The social and economic insecurity of daughters are the results of indigenous patriarchy. Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as my factory, my pineapples, my pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property. Chacko said, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57).

Through the perception of the twins, this text of Roy's also brings into focus a big issue of the field—the Anglophiles. Pappachi, the Imperial Entomologist, is an "incurable British CCP, which was short for chhi-chhi poach and in Hindi meant shit-wiper" (51) and "Until the day he dies, even in the stifling Ayemenem heat, every single day, Pappachi wore a well pressed three piece suit and his gold pocket watch" (49). Pappachi is the perfect example of the "class of interpreters" of T.B. Macaulay. Macaulay said: "We must form a class of interpreters—Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."

After Ammu's separation, Pappachi does not believe Ammu's story—"not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn't believe that an Englishman, any Englishman would covet another man's wife" (42). Chacko's proclamation that they are a family of Anglophiles is confirmed with the arrival of Margaret and Sophie. Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria—all are overexcited to welcome the British guests. To the kids it is termed as the "'Welcome Home our Sophie Mol 'Play'." The week before their arrival is also equally irritating as it is "What Will Sophie Mol Think? Week." A naked exposure of the Anglophiles is found in Baby Kochamma's attitude too:

The whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines—'impositions' she called them—I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English. A hundred times each. (36)

Sometimes the twins are found to be making efforts to understand adult standards and ways of language. Chacko says that Ammu and Estha and Rahel are "millstones around his neck" (85). They know about "millstones" that are put around the necks of corpses before throwing them to water when people die at sea. The adult world confuses the kids with their understanding of some basic words like "love" and "duty." In her list Rahel feels obliged to put Mammachi before Velutha; and include Sophie Mol only because she is her cousin and needs to be loved. But Rahel is continually torn "between love and duty." "Fountain-haired" Rahel tries hard to cope with the idea of "infinite joy" that can even make her Ammu love Sophie Mol more than her. But that "infinite joy" sounds like "a sad fish with fins all over" to her (118). They are really unable to grasp the adult world that transforms their Ammu into ashes, bearing a receipt no. Q498673. Finally, when Estha speaks the adult language, "yes," that becomes the closing word for his soul—"Not death. Just the end of living" (321). With that single adult word, Estha's "childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt" (320).

The children themselves sort different ways out of these adult language problems. They recreate their own linguistic world to overcome the inadequacies of the adult world. Estha and Rahel are pretty good in creating words of their own, when necessary. Restructuring of regular words and sudden unusual capitalizations are also common among these kids. Sometimes they take shelter under linguistic devices like personification or symbolism. They also frequently change their identities with different peculiar meaningless names according to their circumstances.

In spite of Ammu's corrections about "irregular space between words," portmanteau or adjoining words seem to be a common passion for the children. "Bluegreyblue eyes, Orangedrink Lemondrink Man" (136), "CocaColaFantaicecreamrosemilk, Ofcourseofcourse, longago, Deadlypurposed" (142), "Whatisit" (4), "Whathappened" (4), "furrywhirring" (4), "sariflapping" (4), "Finethankyou" (69), "dearohdear" (73)—all are unusually combined words by the children.

The children have their own matters of importance which are not necessarily the same as adults. And many a time they use capital letters to indicate these important episodes of their own. "Outside, the Air was Alert and Bright and Hot" (201); "Ammu explained later that Too Briefly meant For Too Short a while" (7); "The History House"; "A Far More Angry Than Necessary feeling"; "Is. That. Clear? Ammu said again"; "it was best to just Let Her Be"; "The Audience was a Big Man. Estha was a Little Man, with the tickets"; "A Free Cold Drink"—all these expressions allow us to have a few glimpses into the twins' secret world.

The kids take help of personification in different incidents. Estha thinks it is his "mouth" that uttered the word "yes." Again, it is Ammu's mouth, "trying-not-to-cry mouth," that bade "bye" to Estha, he thinks. Their mother's love is expressed through her eyes and they long to see those "Ammu-eyes." At times it is only the depth of the situation that is portrayed through personification: "A silence sat between grand-niece and baby grand aunt like a third person. A stranger. Swollen. Noxious" (21).

Rahel's watch is a remarkable symbol in this text. She is found to look at her watch repeatedly though it has only one painted time: ten to two. Her watch is left behind in the history house when life actually stopped for them. Rahel always longs to have a real watch where the time can be changed. And it is the time of their real world that the siblings want to change.

The twins' repeated shifting of identities, their own and others as well, show their constant effort to fit in an adult world. They are sometimes the "Frightened eyes and a fountain." Or have the heavy duty of being the "Ambassadors of India. Their Excellencies Ambassador E(lvis). Pelvis, and Ambassador S(tick). Insect." Estha is often "Elvis Presley" or "Esthappen Un-known." In his own story, Estha writes: "Rahel was a maharani and I was Little Nehru." To his beloved Velutha Estha has a different entity: "Esthappappychachen Kuttappen Peter Mon" (152). With Sophie Mol they visit Velutha's house and pretend to be Mrs Pillai, Mrs Eapen and Mrs Rajagopalan. Their secret missions to the hideout place make the twins "Comrade Rahel" and "Comrade Estha." Their frustrated defeated condition is expressed through their titles again: "Bewildered Twin Ambassadors of God-knows-what." It is not only for them that they create new identities. They do it for others as well. Velutha's tragedy make the helpless kids take shelter in the world of fiction where they allot a new identity for him: "It's his twin brother. Urumban. From Kochi," says Rahel. (311) And Estha confirms her hours later:

"You were right. It wasn't him. It was Urumban."  
 "Thank god," Rahel whispered back.  
 "Where d'you think he is?"  
 "Escaped to Africa." (320)

The children's musical language brings a light tone to the tragedy. Estha sings from the popular Popeye the Sailor cartoon:

I'm Popeye the sailor man dum dum  
 I live in a cara-van dum dum  
 I op-en the door  
 And fall- on the floor  
 I'm Popeye the sailor man dum dum (98)

Rahel is also spontaneous with her music: “There was/ A girl/ Tall and/ Thin and/ Fair/ Her hair/ Her hair/ Was the delicate colourov/ Gin-~~nnn~~-ger (leftleft, right)/ There was/ A girl-” (141). Sometimes they simply describe their surroundings in rhythms: “Scurrying hurrying buying selling luggage trundling porter paying children shitting people spitting coming going begging bargaining reservation-checking” (300).

The children have reported the surrounding adult world in their own ways. At times they are found to try to cope in that world where language does not speak of the reality or expose the ugly face of society. Nevertheless, after twenty three years they are in the same state, only seeking rationality from the so-called rational civilized adult world: “They didn’t ask to be left off lightly. They only asked for punishments that fitted their crimes” (326).

Estha and Rahel try to understand adult values. But the irony of their fate is that when they become adults themselves, they cannot understand it. They remain the victims of the adult world:

A pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. Stumbling through their parts, nursing someone else’s sorrow. Grieving someone else’s grief. Unable, somehow, to change plays. Or purchase, for a fee, some cheap brand of exorcism from a counselor with a fancy degree, who would sit them down and say, in one of many ways: ‘You’re not the Sinners. You’re the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the victims, not the perpetrators.’ (191)

*The God of Small Things* takes us on a tour inside a child’s kingdom, a dream world that all of us have left behind years ago. Through their unprejudiced judgment, the children point out the treachery and duplicity of the adult world. They also decide their own ways to cope with these deceits and betrayals of adults. In the easy and fitting language of children, Roy shows her mastery over language that she skillfully uses to express her thoughts.

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