



BOOK REVIEW

# No Small Achievement:

## *The God of Small Things*

by **Arundhati Roy**

**Review : Ruth Vanita**

**W**HEN I read the first sentence, “May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month”, I thought this was going to be yet another exotic postcolonial novel about the land of heat and dust, incense and spices. But *The God of Small Things* rapidly reveals its disinterest in trying to encapsulate India, and its complete immersion in one community’s, one family’s universe.

There is probably not much by way of praise that has not already been lavished on this novel that was internationally acclaimed even before its publication, and that has made Roy the first Indian to win the Booker prize. Yet, several Indian readers of my acquaintance, all of them academics, have begrudged the novel its success and wondered how it is better than others that have been less feted, for example, the novels of Amitav Ghosh. In my own view, of all that has been written by the new crop of Indian writers in English, this book and Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate* are in a class by themselves. They could be in any English literature syllabus on their own terms, without the need to plead a special multicultural case.

Roy’s greatest gift is her power of memory, the kind of memory Charles

Dickens and George Eliot had, which can bring alive for the reader what most of us have forgotten but can recall if jogged. What it felt like to be a child, “a stranger and afraid in a world we never made”, yet endowed with as much or more ability to experience the supposedly adult emotions of anxiety, jealousy, grief, despair, as well as what Rahel’s uncle Chacko tells her are “possible in Human Nature. Love. Madness. Hope. Infinite Joy”. The novel’s protagonist, Rahel and her twin brother, Estha, become fit carriers for whatever the novel is saying about the human condition, because their very fragility, without the adult illusion of control over life’s fluidity, makes it poignantly obvious how vulnerable they, like their apparently less vulnerable elders, are to social, political and emotional phenomena that can mercilessly devour their lives.

Vulnerability, the ability to be physically and psychologically wounded, appears in this novel as the condition almost all the characters, whether likeable or unlikable, share. From the malicious aunt Baby Kochamma, nursing an unfulfilled passion for an Irish monk to the cruel grandfather Pappachi, deprived of his moment of glory by a historical accident, each one is somehow damaged, although the damage is not

always as evident as it is in the case of Estha whose trauma results in his ceasing to speak.

Roy has a marvellous ability to sum up a damaged life in a couple of felicitous phrases, for instance, the description of the great grandmother’s portrait: “With her eyes she looked in the direction her husband looked. With her heart she looked away”. Or Baby Kochamma discovering television, cosmetics and jewellery in old age: “Baby Kochamma had lived her life backwards. As a young woman she renounced the material world, and now, as an old one, she seemed to embrace it. She hugged it and it hugged back”. One can recognise many older women in this. I think Roy’s facility with language is more evident and more promising in such descriptions than in the much more flashy wordplay of phrases like “a viable die-able age”, or her all-pervasive use of children’s lingo which makes the novel sparkle delightfully, but becomes somewhat overdone towards the end. For instance, the iteration of the children’s nicknames sometimes seems predictable and tedious.

Similarly, I wondered if the fashionable displacement of linear narrative by a backward and forward movement in time really added anything substantial or only led one

to overlook important details that occurred so early on, they had no significance at that point, and were forgotten by the time they would make sense towards the end. But a tendency to showcase one's experiments is natural, even endearing, in a first novel, and it was a relief to be spared the convolutions of magical realism.

Roy scratches the surface of conventionality to reveal the poignancy of each person's search for happiness or pleasure, like that of a plant turning towards the sun but not always finding it. What she says of this particular Syrian Christian family in Kerala is an insight that many social scientists who make generalisations about tradition-bound Indian society and downtrodden Indian women would do well to remember: "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. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam and jelly jelly".

Merely breaking laws may make for radical politics but does not make characters come alive. What brings them alive are Roy's ear for the rhythms of Indian English ("Feeling vomity"), eye for detail ("his beige and pointy shoes"), and empathy for what passes between people, for example, the fierce bond between mother and child:

"Ammu said: 'Okay, Esthappen?' Estha said 'Okay', and shook his head carefully to preserve his puff. *Okay? Okay.* He put the comb back into her handbag. Ammu felt a sudden clutch of love for her reserved and dignified little son in his beige pointy shoes, who had just completed his first adult assignment".

Roy creates an array of unforgettable characters, some, like

the smugly opportunistic local leader Comarade Pillai, preserved in aspic with Dantean mercilessness, others, like confused and yearning Uncle Chacko, represented with a sense that they cannot be entirely encompassed in words. Even minor figures like the servant Kochu Maria, trading vinegary insults with the children and secretly devouring chocolate icing, are brilliant little vignettes. The only instance in which she failed, for this reader at least, was with Velutha, the title figure, who, unlike every other character, is just too perfect to be believable. Perhaps this functions as part of the design — as the God figure, he is more a symbol than a person, necessarily distant from the middle class embroilments that engulf him. One could not help wondering, however, if this representation of him as perfect was partly caused by residual political correctness—the oppressed untouchable must be presented uncritically.

I had similar doubts about Ammu's untimely death. While Velutha's brutal death at the hands of policemen in cahoots with the upper

castes is more than likely, Ammu's death seemed more like the novelist succumbing to the power of the Indian-woman-as-victim narrative convention than anything else. The Indian middle class does not abandon its own so easily, and an English-educated woman as feisty as Ammu, especially from a state like Kerala with such a long tradition of women travelling and working on their own would surely have been able to survive on her own in a big city. I know of upper caste women of a much older generation who became successful professionals after their youthful affairs with lower caste men were thwarted and the men concerned done to death by the women's families. The hurried way Ammu's death is presented suggests the novelist's discomfort with this turn in the plot.

But these are small flaws in a wonderful book. If one were looking for a measure of India's vitality in the fiftieth year of independence, I would see it in the publication of this book — an indicator that our cultural and creative traditions are alive and well. □

---

## *For You*

*If my life blooms into a flower  
let it replace a thorn beneath your feet,  
The flower is for you.  
If my life collects into a cloud,  
Let it nourish the garden of your hopes  
The Cloud is for you  
If my life is just a thought  
Let it be your inspiration  
The thought is for you  
If my life is nothing  
Let it be your enlightenment, your prosperity,  
But if my life grows into love for you,  
Let that alone be my identity  
That alone is for me.*

**Mukta Sen**