

Chapter One:

Introduction

To me the god of small things is the inversion of God. God's a big thing and God's in control.

The God of Small Things [...] whether its the way children see things or whether its the insect life in the book, or the fish or the stars. There is a not accepting of what we see as adult boundaries.

Arundhati Roy¹

Arundhati Roy was not a prestigious writer before she published her first novel *The God of Small Things (TGOST)* in 1997. As a matter of fact, she had few literary experiences before she wrote the book: she had only written two screenplays and some articles for the newspaper. Yet this fiction made her the only Indian writer who won the Booker Prize (now called Man Booker Prize) in the nineties. It had been more than a decade after Salman Rushdie won the award with his novel *Midnight's Children* in 1981 that finally another Indian writer was able to be honored by this prize. Not only was she much graced by western critics, she was also welcomed by readers worldwide: according to *Frontline* magazine, the book had sold globally nearly a million copies by the end of 1997, and up to six million copies so far. Roy's stunning achievement definitely made her the dark horse in the literary circle, and also made people want to know more about this new female writer who was said

¹ Shulin Nishant, "Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," *Contemporary Postcolonial and Post Imperial Literature in English* 4 June. 2001, National University of Singapore, 6 Apr. 2005 <<http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/India/roy/nishant1.html#colonialism>>.

to make a “Tiger Woodsian-debut” (Updike 101).

The backdrop of the novel is set in the southern part of India, a town named Aymanam (spelled as Ayemenem in the novel) in the Kerala state. In Kerala, Syrian Christians make up one-third of the population, which is a higher percentage of Christians compared to the other states in India. They constitute the middle and high hierarchy of the Kerala society. Roy’s relatives on her mother’s side are of this ethnic group. Though Kerala is where Roy spent her childhood and the locale of *TGOST*, the image of Kerala in the novel is not that favorable due to the fact that Roy highlights a harsher reality of it: the discrimination between castes and genders, which are subjects few Indian writers dare to openly touch upon. Though Kerala is a progressive state, it is notorious for its “exceptionally rigid caste system, in which each caste occupies a fairly definite position” (154), as the Indian sociologist K. C. Alexander states. Gail Omvedt also points out that back to the pre-colonial period, Kerala even encompassed the extremes of caste hierarchy with “unseeable” as well as “untouchable” castes (39). In Roy’s narration, she kept a detailed account of the caste division of Kerala in the 60s. In the contemporary Kerala, the untouchables who converted to Christians and were theoretically not regulated by the caste system anymore, were still taken as untouchables and called Rice-Christians (or Neo-Christians) to indicate their pre-untouchables identities. The caste discrimination is retained among the Syrian Christians because the caste division is a deep-rooted conception for them even though this biased viewpoint is contrary to their ostensibly charitable deeds. Roy ridiculed general Syrian Christians’ hypocrisy and obviously showed more sympathy to those downtrodden untouchables.

As for the situation of women, Roy indicates that the violence abuse upon women is vehement. Men in the novel beat their wives a lot whether he is a high-brow British entomologist, or a low-brow *Kathakali* dancer. Roy's picture about Syrian Christian women's struggles with life is very impressive. Roy revealed that a woman's choices were limited in the 60s' Kerala. Even if she was a girl from a reputed Syrian Christian family, it did not mean she was allowed more freedom than other less well-born girls: she can choose either to maintain a subservient relationship with her husband and being abused by him like most women do, or to divorce her husband and being abused by the public, like the daring character Ammu in the novel. K. C. Alexander's research helps declare this situation: "Behavior affecting the family is strictly regulated among the Syrian Christians who prohibit polygamy and divorce. [...] The relationship between husband and wife is considered to be sacred, sex relations outside the family are condemned" (159). This statement offers a basic understanding for the readers outside Kerala to the situation that Ammu is confronted with.

Even before *TGOST*, Arundhati had revealed her concern about the repressed women and the lower-castes in the society. In 1994, Roy wrote a series of essays called "The Great Indian Rape Trick" to support a female gangster Phoolan Devi, who was originally a simple Dalit [untouchable] girl yet joined the bandit to defend herself from keeping sexually harassed by the men of higher castes. Devi's story became such a legend in India and even the whole world that one film producer made the biographical movie *Bandit Queen* based on her story. The problem about this movie is the fact that the film visualizes many rape scenes without the consent of Devi

herself, and the producer showed no apology by claiming that his film is meant to reveal the truth. Roy's essays satirized this justification and declared that it is a usual trick for the society and the media to utilize the name of "truth" to exploit women and their bodies. Other than criticizing the gender issue, Roy pointed out that the director of the film intentionally neglected the sensitive topic of caste violence. Julie Mullaney observed that, "this earlier confrontation with the intricacies of the caste system has shaped Roy's later discussions of caste in *TGOST*. Caste, and the various histories of complicity and transgression that mark it as a wider system of classification and belonging, are important themes in the novel" (8-9).

In April 1997, Roy published *TGOST* in Delhi, and it won the Booker Prize in October of the same year. The news caught many native critics and media by surprise since Roy is a female Indian writer. Some critics celebrated this newcomer in the literary circle, while others felt offended by the context of the novel. The opponents of the book were irritated by the fact that instead of giving an alluring picture of India, Roy's India is rather gloomy. She described her motherland and also Indian men as backward. Many of them believed that Roy's negative narration was her way of pandering to the taste of western world. They also criticized that Roy misrepresented the historical past. In fact, the question about whether or not the book is about the true history was furiously discussed. According to the citation read at the Booker award ceremony, the compliments the judges paid to the book *TGOST* are "with extraordinary linguistic inventiveness Arundhati Roy funnels the history of South India through the eyes of seven-year old twins." Roy seemed to disagree with this in an interview, and stated that "I have to say that my book is not

about history but biology and transgression” (Wibur 46). Roy’s defense gave rise to another critic Rao Ranga’s objection, that “if it is not about history why makes it a point, Ms. Roy, to tell us about the remarkable coincidence?” (XIII). But there were other critics backing up for Roy’s writing and refuting those who took Roy’s fiction as derogatory to historical reality. As M. Dason’s remark: “Rather than merely arguing whether the work is a historical fiction or a product of the novelist’s imagination, it would be appropriate to discuss it as a conscious statement of something she had to say, something she wanted to tell the public” (26).

Critical Reviews

TGOST has been introduced into Taiwan for almost a decade until I finish this thesis. Except for my paper, there are other two theses also about the novel. One is Su-Ching Wu’s *Remembrance of Things Past: Representation and Transgression in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things*; the other is Weining Bear’s *Violence in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things*. The former thesis concentrates on the feministic issues in the novel. Wu unveils how Roy’s lines are compatible to Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas about mimicry and hybridity and also utilizes Gayatri C. Spivak’s postcolonial feminism to see the transgression of the female characters in the novel. Bear’s thesis accentuates the theme of violence in the novel. It deals with different violence displayed in Ipe family including the state violence, social violence and family violence. Though my thesis also touches on the feministic aspects as Wu’s thesis does, the feministic issue is only one of my threads. Besides, I adopt a dissimilar way to see the feminine issues rather than only using third-world feminism.

I choose to reveal how the purity and motherhood paradigm severely stress on woman. Through this analysis, Roy's intention to bring up the cruelty caused by inhuman regulation can be more clearly stated. My thesis resembles Bears's thesis in the parts about the violence imposed on Velutha. We both start the discussion how the caste system works to violate the untouchables' rights of living. Yet, while Bear's composition is purely about the violence structure in the novel, my thesis is constituted by many scholars' theory about the impure essence of the untouchables which is meant to justify my connection of Kristeva's theory of abjection with the irrational horror hidden beneath the murder of Velutha. Furthermore, my thesis begins the central argument by revelation of the Roy's sarcasm toward the mythical stories through her detailed narration traditional *Kathakali* dance which is never really been given enough focus before. Above all, the most distinctive part in the thesis is the major them: how the purity code dominates and restricts every aspect of life in the novel. The paradigm of purity is the major issue which encompasses all the topics and gives a fresh look to the story of Roy.

The Context and the Style of the Novel

The story begins with a thirty-one-year-old Indian woman Rahel's homecoming from America to Ayemenen. She goes back for her "dizygotic" twin brother Estha, who has muted for a long time and does not seem to recognize anyone. They have been separated for twenty three years, and each of them has been through a tough life: Rahel has been deprived of mental care since adolescence and just divorces her American husband; Estha has been forced to live with his father without the company

of his mother and sister, and is sent back to Ayemenem because his father is going to emigrate to Australia. Little by little, the cruel things happening in Ayemenem House back to the time when they were seven years old surface through Rahel's reminiscences of the past. In the 1960s' Ayemenem, the twins' beautiful but fierce mother Ammu Ipe decidedly divorces her alcoholic husband and brings the twins back to her birthplace to live with her parents Pappachi [grandfather], Mammachi [grandmother], her brother Chacko and her aunt Baby Kochamma. Though the Ipes is one household which owns respectable reputation, Ammu never wants to go back. But she does not have any other choices. Her family does not welcome her back either, considering that a divorced daughter brings shame to the family. So in Ayemenem House, the only joy-provider to the twins is a charming young man Velutha, who is a talented carpenter and also an untouchable whom Ammu has known since little. Then the tragedy is initiated by Chacko's invitation of his British ex-wife Margaret Kochamma and his daughter Sophie Mol over to spend their Christmas. Their coming is so much valued by the whole family that every family member has prepared for it for one week before they arrive. Rahel and Estha are anxious about the fact that their cousin Sophie Mol is a girl "Loved from the Beginning" (129), fearing that even Ammu would love Sophie Mol more than she would love them. When Sophie Mol actually arrives, the flattering to this pair of British relatives is even more unbearable for Ammu and her twins to take and thus drives them to the edge. Ammu eventually can not hold her desire towards the untouchable Velutha anymore, and she crosses Meenachal River by the boat which her twins find to secretly visit Velutha every night. This affair only maintains a

week before Velutha's father Vellya Paapen tells Mammachi about the couple's secret meetings. Ammu is locked in her room and Velutha is fired. As a faithful member in the work union, Velutha thus turns to the leader Comrade K. N. M. Pillai for help. Velutha's request is turned down because Comrade Pillai has always been troubled by Velutha's untouchable identity and finds it a good chance to get rid of him.

Simultaneously, the twins are planning to go out for an adventure by taking the same boat which Ammu uses because they think their mother loves them no more. Sophie Mol insists to join them, and she is accidentally swept by the running water of Meenachal River for the monsoon rain. Out of malice towards Velutha, Baby Kochamma tells the police that Velutha has raped Ammu and kidnapped the children. The Inspector sends his man to arrest him and drag him back to the police station afterwards even though he has already been a living-dead. Baby Kochamma tricks Estha that either he identifies Velutha as the abductor, or the family will all go to jail for Sophie Mol's death. Estha reacts according to Baby Kochamma's dictation and from then on he is tortured by guilt. Ammu is expelled from Ayemenem House, and Estha is sent back to his father. This little family is never united ever again because Ammu dies in a cheap hotel at the age of thirty-one, the same age of the twins now. At one night, Rahel and Estha again break the Love Law as Ammu and Velutha do years ago, sharing the same guilt and remorse between them.

Roy adopts a brave new way of storytelling, refreshing both in form and language. While constructing the story, Roy breaks the chronological sequences of events and juxtaposes Rahel's flashbacks of twenty years ago and present situations with her authorial omnipresent viewpoints. Her writing thus keeps readers

wondering what has really happened because Roy diverts from directly telling whenever the answer is getting close. Just as Roy concludes, “in the first chapter I more or less tell you the story, but the novel ends in the middle of the story, and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word “tomorrow” (Wibur 46). After finishing the first chapter of the novel, the readers can only sense that there is something dark afoot, yet do not know what it is. Then gradually we learn from the twisted subplot that Ammu and the twins are not exactly the ones who should be responsible for Sophie Mol’s death. And the mystery is unveiled step by step.

Moreover, the novel’s focus shifts from one character to another, revealing each one’s unknown history. Take the character Chacko for an example. Under the cover of a lecherous fat man, Chacko is also a husband distraught over the divorce with the only woman he loves and aches for the love to her daughter Sophie Mol. In another negative character Baby Kochamma, we read about her hidden story as well. The author discloses the reason why she harbors hatred towards Ammu by flashbacks: back when she is a teenager, she falls in love desperately with a Catholic priest but ends up disastrously. The loss of her first love transforms her into a vicious persona who likes to see others to be as unfortunate as she is. Roy’s intention may just be revealed by her quotation from John Berger on the epigraph of the novel: “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one.”

Other than the structure, Roy’s stylistic language in the novel is unique as well. Not only that does she use a lot of words in the vernacular language of Malayalam, but she also “coins some new terminology and turns and twists language to conform

to the feeling as a result of which we can see broken sentences, illogical statements, unrestricted sprinkling of italics, bizarre phrases, ungrammatical constructions, unconventional rhythm etc” (Prasad 136). With these seemingly disruptive sentences, Roy’s prose contains some poetic traits. The examples are numerous, and one of them is about the twins’ fascination of the river:

It was warm, the water. Graygreen. Like rippled silk.

With fish in it.

With the sky and trees in it.

And at night, the broken yellow moon in it (117).

Apart from these poetic sentences, the most notable “ungrammatical constructions” are the abundantly capitalized words. Many critics claim that this is of Rushdie’s influence, though Roy begs to differ. On the one hand, Roy’s intentional violation of proper English produces a reading barrier for the general readers; on the other hand, it also shows her inventiveness in language.

The Structure and the Theoretical Framework of this Thesis

In this thesis, I rely on “the model of purity” to scrutinize all the “small things” displayed in Arundhati Roy’s text. By using the term I call “the model of purity,” I intend to highlight a systematical paradigm which obstinately reinforces a binary boundary in many hierarchies and stratifications. All kinds of stratifications, no matter the Big God/ Small God opposition in the mythic stories, the ladder between the social groups, or the opposition between the genders, must go through a purifying process to build up its symbolic order: that every individual subject in the system will

be asked to identify with one central self, one pure essence in conformity to the institutionalized value. Meanwhile, the subject is also asked to dispose of the impure other just as the human body rejects the polluted elements to protect its cleanness. Only after the subject carries out this mission of “abjection” is the purification ensured. This purifying process maintains the systematic order at the expense of victimization of the Otherness. In *TGOST*, we can see those who transgress the boundary are severely punished, because their deeds threaten the demarcation. The fear of the confusion they cause to the solid identification system brings about the abjective reaction. Roy gives an accurate account of how abjection to the heterogeneous other can be drastically violent by narrating Velutha and Ammu’s family’s story. Through the explication on the omnipresent purity code in Roy’s text, we can have a better idea about the ostracizing of the marginal figures and prosecution on them.

In Chapter One of this thesis, I offer the background knowledge about *The God of the Small Things*. A brief introduction of the author and her hometown Kerala is first brought up since Roy presents her astringent observations to the contemporary Kerala society in the novel. What follows is the plot summary of the story and the explication of Roy’s special writing style. Roy’s ingenious language attracts the critics’ attention and also explores the new possibilities of English writing. Besides, Roy chooses to use a meandering way to tell her story, refusing to follow the beginning-intermediacy-ending line. The readers can hardly be given a chance to have a glimpse of what has really happened because the author always stops when the narration is approaching to revelation. Lastly, I will introduce the framework of this

thesis, giving the basic idea of each chapter.

In Chapter Two, I will argue that Roy utilizes different personal utterances to mine the unreliability of One saying. In the chapter “Kochu Thomban,” Roy narrates the traditional Southern Indian play-dance *Kathakali* and two episodes from Indian epic *Mahabharata*. My argument will start from analyzing Roy’s treatment of the “Great Stories,” and extend to the discussion about the opposition of the Big God and the Small God. The Big God refers to one authoritative purifying system. The Big God can be the traditional mythic stories, History, or any other language games in which the One saying always gains upper hand, while other sayings, represented by Roy’s simile of Small God, are deemed as heretic and would be eventually prohibited. So by adding the mythical stories into the novel, Roy means not to reinforce the local flavor but to pinpoint the fact that the once respected myths no longer retain the glory of the past. Her attitude can be detected from her way of presenting the epic: she quips those *Kathakali* dancers, the lack of variations in the Great Stories and the ambiguity of those epic heroes. The ideas about grand narrative and small narrative of Jean-François Lyotard will be explicated to support my standpoint that Roy’s anti-nostalgic version of myth is originated from her disbelief towards any authoritative saying.

Lyotard recites the example of the storytelling in the *Cashinahua* tribe to explain the monotonic texture and the impossibilities of differences of the *grand narrative* in many of his works. In *Just Gaming*, he summarizes the narrative cycle of *Cashinahua* tribe to highlight how *grand narrative* demands obedience. He puts it directly that every narrator in this narrating practice is “not as autonomous,” but as

“heteronomous.” This is because the law that dominates the narrative is “a law that is has received” (32). Once the narrator enters this narrative cycle, he needs to abide by the transcendental law that has been recognized by many others before, or he will not be identified nor incorporated by the social norms. In other words, the all-encompassing narrative law superimposes on the narrators so that each of them evolves into a passive figure before the grand tradition.

Roy’s text corresponds with Lyotard’s discourse and carries a step further to uncover the invisibility of the minority subjects in the grand narratives. The essence of the grand narrative provides a perfect diagram for us to realize how the authenticity takes shape and grows static. Roy then illuminates on the idea that the grand narrative is a system in which the Big God is forever favored and in the mean time the Small God is forever damned. In other words, the grand narratives draws a line to distinguish which elements are permitted and which are not. It makes sure that what is contained in its category is official, orthodox, and “pure.” Roy shows that this systematic purification is a repetitively ongoing process not only in the times past, but also in the present time. The social institution builds up a certifying principle through the agency of the grand narrative, disavowing and marginalizing the unorthodox thoughts and subjects. Those subjects can only be repressed and hardly have their say in the ever-the-same traditional narrative. Thus Roy plays all sorts of language games, which Lyotard terms as small (*petit*) narratives. She challenges the authenticity of the grand narratives by word games, including parodying the mythic stories, multiplying the facets of the same story, or irregular spellings to ridicule proper English. The juxtaposition of all these different small narratives allows what

has been submerged in the grand design a chance to emerge from the “official version” of the story. Roy successfully constructs an arena in which all kinds of voices can wrestle together. Moreover, Roy’s delicate touches on the sensitive subject matters make sure her story an outlet of the minor subjects.

In Chapter Three, the discussion is focused on the character Velutha, who Roy praises as “the god of the small things²,” and the people’s fear oriented towards him. Roy gives a rather clear history to the life of untouchables in the contemporary Kerala and exposes the unfair treatment against them by narrating Velutha’s story. The oppression upon these untouchables is so omnipresent that even Velutha’s father Vellya Paapen cannot help but betraying his own son in exchange for his own safety. To fully explain the essence of the biases to the untouchables, I refer to Louis Dumont and other scholars’ researches on the caste system. Then I will illuminate the ritual purity essence which is central in the caste system with Mary Douglas’s conception about purity.

In Douglas’s phenomenal work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, she demonstrates how the purity constructs the social demarcation. By the reference to the assumption that the untouchables are unblessed because of their impure essence, I would like to connect it to the thematic opposition of purity/ impurity in the novel. The principle of purity and impurity dictates each character’s behavior and makes Velutha, unfortunately, endowed with defilement. Moreover, he is doubly embedded himself the inexcusable sin by trying to transgress the principle. Roy wryly suggests that the police’s displacement of Velutha is

² Roy declares that Velutha is “The God of Small Things” in the chapter eleven of the novel.

performed under a fully justified cause: they are “exorcising fear”(293). In the story, Roy gives a shocking image of how the fear aroused by the minor subjects can lead to a schemed destruction towards them.

I will then use the conception of *abjection* to explicate this fear, which triggers the violence imposed on Velutha. My intention of using the term abjection is to give a better description about how a homogenous community like Ayemenem village in the novel will rule out a heterogeneous figure as Velutha at all costs. Julia Kristeva combines Douglas’s ideas of purity into her own discourse on abjection and uses it to analyze the abomination towards certain things or ethnic groups which violates the paradigm of purity. In this essay *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva coins the term “abjection” to characterize certain ambiguous mood and gestures of the human bodies, such as acts of vomiting. To her this reaction has two meanings: on one hand the self rejects the unwanted food which intrudes the clean body; on the other hand, because the food has entered the body and become a part of it, the rejection of the food is no difference from rejection of the self. Hence abjection is an attempt to divide the self from the other without recognizing linkage between them.

Developing from this starting point, Kristeva points out that anything blurs the boundary or defies constraints of the regulation is taken as a latent threat to the pure paradigm and thus is often described as abjection. To see Velutha’s case in this perspective, we can realize that the sense of impurity in Velutha originated not only from failing to be qualified as purity, but also from the confusion he causes to the borderline. His disturbance of the strict category between purity and impurity evokes fear and thus gives rise to the abjective impulse in people and the urge to

diminish him. This discourse of abjection is probable to illustrate the origin of the malice upon the minor subject, and also Roy's vivid passages about "civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (292).

In Chapter Four, the major argument is that the purity code also dominates the female subjects in the novel. The untouchables are savaged by their unalterable defile identity in the social structure. Likewise, the female characters are bound with the similar essence. The impure essence imposed upon the untouchables is easy to be detected from the firm "untouchable logic" held by the general public, while the impure meaning enforced on the female is much more delicate and complicated. The purity diagram works to condemn female bodies as impure and prohibited, which is also reflected in *The God of the Small Things*. In the previous chapter of this thesis, I have an inchoate discussion about men's ambiguous feeling toward the female body for its fluidity and incapability to be defined in the symbolic world. In this chapter this idea is further delved into. Also, I will explore how the thought of women's bodies being dirty and debased as a result of patriarchal modification and a natural outcome for conformation to men's interest. If the untouchables are meant to stay forever at the bottom of the social hierarchy to serve the majority's needs, women are destined to be blamed for their gender traits to serve men's needs as well. In the novel, we can see that this abjection to female bodies troubles the juvenile Rahel and her unhappy mother Ammu. Both of them have been through a period in which they are tortured by the consciousness of impurity, and both of them struggle to emancipate themselves from constraints of the impure essences.

Women are not only strangled by the so-called woman decency, but are also

veiled under the context of the motherhood. The institutionalized motherhood also defines a valorized paradigm, constructing one “pure” motherhood for every woman to follow. Yet, even though a woman does follow the very paradigm, it does not mean that she owns the real power in her family as a mother if the identity of the mother is no more than a product of social construction. Roy broaches this subject and looks into the discordance between the appropriated motherhood and the real motherhood. From the children’s perspectives, Roy faithfully portrays the true face of a mother: a woman who is always torn between the responsibility and personal needs. The far-fetched and over-idealistic motherhood oppresses women as much as the purity criteria on the female bodies does. They both work to devour the individuality and distinctness in every woman.

In the conclusion of the thesis, I explain why I pick up purity code to be the main topic of my thesis and give a final retrospection to the whole thesis. Then I will bring up again the issue about how we should treat the historical truth in Roy’s text since this is a much debated issue in Roy’s home town. This brief contestation about *The God of Small Things* would be the closing of this thesis.