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The Narrative Technique and the Role of Social Realism in Arundhati Roy's "The god of Small Things"

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Abstract

The present research work deals with the narrative art and Arundhati Roy's famous booker winner novel "The god of small things". It is a story about the childhood experiences of the twins whose lives are destroyed by the "Love Laws" that lay down "who should be loved, and how. How much"? The novel describes how the small things in life affect people's behaviour and their lives. The book won the "Booker Prize" in 1997. The book took four years to write. The god of small things is not written in a sequential narrative style in which events unfold chronologically. This non-sequential narrative style, which determines the form of the novel, is an extremely useful authorial tool. In this essay we discussed the art of narration and role of social realism in the famous novel "The God of Small Things".

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, The god of Small Things, Narrative, Realism.

1. Introduction

Arundhati Roy was born on 24 November 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya, India. She is an Indian author and political activist who are best known for the 1998 "Man Booker Prize" for her best "Fiction" novel "The God of Small Things" (1997) and for her involvement in human rights. Her father was a Bengali Hindu tea plantation manager from Calcutta and her mother Mary Roy is from Kerala. When she was of two, her parents divorced and she returned with her mother and brother to Kerala. Ms. Roy attended school at Corpus Christi, Kottayam, followed by the Lawrence School, Lovedale (Tamil Nadu). Roy wrote her first novel "The God of Small Things" which was completed in 1996. The book is semi-autobiographical and a major part captures her childhood experiences in Ayamanam. The publication of "The God of Small Things" catapulted Roy to international fame. It received the 1997 Booker Prize for Fiction and was listed as one of the "New York Times" Notable Books of the Year for 1997. The novel is a patchwork of flashbacks and lengthy side tracks that weave together to tell the story of the family.

2. Discussion

Arundhati Roy won the prestigious Man Booker Prize of 1997 for her work "The God of Small Things". She was born in Bengal and her father was a Bengali Hindu tea planter but her mother Mary Roy, Well-known as social activist, is from Kerala. As her parents divorced when she was of two years so she returned with her mother and brother to Kerala. She spent her crucial childhood years in Ayamanam, a small town near Kottayam. Here, her mother started an informal school named Corpus Christi. Most of the location features in 'The God of Small Things' are derived from this actual town and surroundings. Ms. Roy herself says, "I grew up in many similar circumstances to the children in the book. My mother was divorced and I lived on the edge of the community in a very vulnerable fashion."

Arundhati Roy in her novel reflects all concerns of society such as untouchability, women miserable life, poverty, social injustice etc.

The rebellious note in the novel is very much contained in the title the author chose for it. As Ramesh K. Shrivastav says, "Undoubtedly, Velutha the Paravan, is the God of Small Things. Velutha is a small Paravan whose activities are too trivial to be given heroic dimensions ammu considers him the God of Small Things. Arundhati Roy's aim is to transform the humble men and women into heroic creatures who challenge the hypocritical yet zealous quadrons of social taboos and codes of behaviour and smilingly sacrifice their lives in the end.

Arundhati Roy says about velutha:-

"The God of Loss

The God of Small Things

He left no foot-prints in sand, no

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Ripples in water, no images in mirrors.”

Roy's novel deals not with one reality, but several realities. The opening page of the novel bears a line from John Berger: “Never again will a single story be told As though it's the only one.”

The novel deals with small things, the consciousness of these things, the situations and the characters if we take all its strands together, is the oppressive system of society that asserts its power by enlisting the help of many centres of social change.

The narrative art has been seen under a notable development in recent Indian English fiction. Never before had been seen such a tremendous enthusiasm and courage, as we see in this novelists; “allegory, symbols, fantasy, magical realism, narrative fluctuating backwards and forwards in time, the compelling use of narrator, fluency in story-telling and the unveiling of layers and layers of meaning have all become a mode of writing. In this tradition, Arundhati Roy adds a strong and lively spirit of experimentalism in “The God of Small Things”.

The Booker citation remarks, “Her narrative crackles with riddles and yet tells its tale quite clearly. We are all engrossed by this moving novel” and Arundhati Roy says, “For me language is a skin on my thought and I was thinking about it as a story, and was thinking of a way of telling it.” The most remarkable feature is the author's invention of “Multiple technique”, we are at once aware of several strands and levels of narration.

The other feature is that a dominant voice is that of the omniscient author. Her presence makes it possible to tell the “tale from shifting points of view”, with author's comments on observations. In literature this has always been the favourite technique. It enables the author to get access into the characters and situations and determine the course of novel's development which otherwise would not possible.

The opening passage of the novel gives us a beautiful description of the external world seen through a pointer's eye. Brief sentences can be made to express meaning in different ways.

The use of interior monologue enables the author to reveal the inner drama of the characters. As we have noted earlier Arundhati Roy's narrative suggests an amalgam of different styles and techniques seeking to probe different dimensions of reality or realities. This is the most suitable art for this kind of novel. Interior monologue is an effective device through which the statuses of mind of various characters are revealed through their own words. For example in chapter – 4, Estha's painful and filthy experience with the orange drinkman and Lemon drinkman is described in a way that uses partly interior monologue.

“Estha convulsed but nothing came – Just thoughts. And they hovered like storm clouds over the Basin city. But the Basin man and Basin women went about their usual basic business. Basin cars and basin buses, still whizzed around basin life went on.”

Arundhati Roy's interior monologue scenes remind us of Jane Austen. She maintains her authorial hold over the narrative. She is the master of dramatic turns. She can see dramatic quality in small situations too. The whole novel is full of drama and her narrative art employs dramatic twists through deft operation of certain literary devices that appear to be characteristically author's own. The central dramatic event is the mutual attraction of the untouchable paravan velutha for the divorced Ammu with two children. Then

sudden changes that occur in Chako's life result in dramatic transformation affecting the lives of most of the members in Ayemanam house. With a dramatic talent that can only be equated with Thomas Hardy's, Arundhati Roy gives voice to the depthless pain of sophic mol's death. The dramatic effect of the accident is enormous.

The structure and narrative style of “The God of Small Things” demand several bold and innovative devices. Stream of consciousness is one of those devices that she employs repeatedly in this novel in a modified form. Interior monologue is in some cases made to admit the stream of consciousness technique. The movement of time is remarkable in Ms. Roy's novel. The novel clearly exemplifies Arundhati Roy's penchant for experimentation with form and language. Her metaphors are imaginative creations that life the characters or situations. The technique of magic realism in the hands of Arundhati Roy becomes very effective. Ms. Roys's novel is about the themes of keep the socially marginalized under subjugation essentially. Roy's language is highly metaphorical which lends a poetic quality such as:-

“Sea – Secrets in his eyes.” She thought of chako's laugh, and a smile stayed in her eyes for a long time.

“Margret Kochamma's tiny ordered life relinquished itself to this trebly baroque bedlam with the quiet gasp of a warm body entering a chilly sea.”

The repetition of words also find in Ms. Roy's language. Ms. Roy breaks one sentence into several small bits, each a complete utterance.

3. See the following example

“He kissed her eyes. Her ears. Her breasts. Her belly, her seven silver stretch marks from her twins.”

One of Ms. Roy's favourite linguistic devices is the use of single words that create a dramatic impact.

The famous Booker prize winner Indian novelist Arundhati Roy is deeply involved with India's social problems, particularly those concerning the socially marginalized and dispossessed people. i. e. dalits, women etc. In “The God of Small Things”, Velutha represents the untouchable who has been since a long time exploited by society simply because he belongs to the so called lower caste. Arundhati Roy uses compressed language, a thrifty style to foreground the essential predicament of the socially oppressed; such is the extraordinary quality of her narrative art. When in chapter – I the Kottayam police inspector Thomas Mathew addresses Ammu, here is the brief naked truth of his coercive behaviour:-

“He stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from Veshyas or their illegitimate children

“If I were you; he said ‘I'd go home quietly then he tapped her breasts with his baton Tap, tap”

There could be nothing more humiliating than to be called Veshya (prostitute) for a respectable woman. Thomas Matthew knows his power and is determined to make her feel it by stripping her of her dignity when he calls her children “illegitimate”. This brief scene burns painful span in the reader's consciousness.

The Ammu – Velutha relation is the key factor in the novel that brings about catastrophe and misfortune on all. Their sexual attraction and relation is beautifully woven in more than one level. On the personal level it represents a union

that opening defies all socially constructed restrictions. The bitterest attack is carried in the novel against the sham lives lived out by the politicians whose double standards of behaviour and talk are exposed by the author. Kerala has always been considered a socially aware state, its awareness level being the highest among all the states of India with a cent percent literacy rate and a tradition of Marxist politics dominating curiously it is also a state where the roots of religious orthodoxy and conservatism go deep and spread over greater part of social life. The pathos of the lives of the men is insightfully brought out. Mark these words:-

“To the Kathakali Man these stories are his children and his childhood. He has grown up with in them. They are the house he was raised in, the meadows he played in.”

The Abhilash Talkies even leaves a permanent mark on Estha’s psyche creating a sense of fear of the orange drink-lemon drink man However, the events in all disturbing details are narrated with a touch of realism that is inhuman and brutal. Arundhati Roy’s realistic exposure is often unsettling and painful. The novel is “moored in space and time and conveys the contemporary social situation with immediacy and poignancy.”

The untouchable protagonist Velutha reaches out in different directions to touch a number of other issues. He is the “God of Small Things, in fact the ‘inversion of God’ as the author herself says.

The character of Velutha has been powerfully drawn in terms of his rebut physique and in born talents for making wooden objects. “He was like a little magician. He could make intricate toys – tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes etc. nor only this, he had exceptional talents for many other things. Velutha’s skills had impressed all. Velutha’s subjugation is multiple. He is born Paravan, son of a Paravan, “a community in Kerala, subjected to extreme ignoring through ages.” However, in Velutha, Arundhati Roy presents before us a youth of new ideas and strength. Velutha is deeply and heart fully aware of his caste and the disadvantages’ this puts him into.

“The God of Small Things” is about several things; one of the chief issues it brings into focus is the family and social mechanism evolved over centuries in traditional Indian society to suppress women and her independence as a human being. Every woman suffers in it in her own way. As one critic observes, “It can be called the story of sufferings of Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Ammu and Rahal.” They all suffer in different ways. In a country like India where patriarchal system is very strong, women suffer mentally, physically and sexually. Ammu’s affair with Velutha becomes an unpardonable offence against family’s reputation and status.

“She was aware of his libertine relationships with the women in the factory, but had ceased to be hurt by them.”

4. Conclusion

To conclude we may say that Ms. Roy has shown in this novel that she can use the stream of – consciousness technique with supreme felicity; yet there are gaps in her narrative structure that her lack of mature craftsmanship prevents her from filling. It is, through these gaps that the reader runs the risk of falling with little grip left over the main storyline. Thus we see that in this novel Ms. Roy puts under focus the deliberately constructed agencies of cruelty that work against women’s interests. In this all are involved, the so called progressive politicians, the family members, the

police etc. Social structures are so formed as to sanctify women’s victimization. Arundhati Roy’s depiction of the miserable lives of women in this novel critiques in unmistakable terms the perpetuation of these exploitative forces. At last we may say that Ms. Roy chiefly satirises the social injustice present in Indian society by this remarkable novel “The God of Small Things.”

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