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# God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy

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**ABSTRACT:** God of Small Things is a story about two children, Esthappen and Rahel. This was Arundhati Roy's debut novel, in which she throws light on certain facets of life in Kerala, highlighting issues of caste system, Keralite Syrian Christian lifestyle and communism.

**KEYWORDS-**Arundhati Roy, novel, caste, communism, debut

## I.INTRODUCTION

The God of Small Things is a family drama novel written by Indian writer Arundhati Roy. It is a story about the childhood experiences of fraternal twins whose lives are destroyed by the "Love Laws" prevalent in 1960s Kerala, India. The novel explores how small, seemingly insignificant occurrences, decisions and experiences shape people's behavior in deeply significant ways. The novel also explores the lingering effects of casteism in India, lending a culturally-specific critique of British colonialism in India. It won the Booker Prize in 1997.

The God of Small Things was Roy's debut novel, published in 1997. It was followed by the 2017 publication, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness twenty years later. Roy began writing the manuscript for The God of Small Things in 1992 and finished four years later, in 1996, leading to its publication the following year. The potential of the story was first recognized by HarperCollins editor, Pankaj Mishra, who sent it to three British publishers. Roy received a £500,000 advance, and rights to the book were sold in 21 countries.[1,2,3]

### Plot

The story is set in Ayemenem, Kerala, with a disjointed narrative shifting between 1969 and 1993. Rahel and Estha, fraternal twins, reunite in 1993. Ammu Ipe, their mother, marries Baba to escape her father and returns to Ayemenem after leaving her abusive husband. Chacko, Ammu's brother, returns from England after his divorce. The family home includes Baby Kochamma, Pappachi's sister, who remained unmarried due to unrequited love. She manipulates events to cause misfortune.

The death of Margaret's second husband in a car accident prompts Chacko to invite her and their daughter, Sophie, to spend Christmas in Ayemenem. On the road to the airport, the family encounters a group of Communist protesters who surround the car and humiliate Baby Kochamma. Rahel thinks she sees amongst the protesters Velutha, an Untouchable servant who works for the family's pickle factory. Later at the theater, Estha is sexually molested by the "Orangedrink Lemondrink Man", a vendor working at the snack counter. Rahel's claim of seeing Velutha in the Communist mob leads Baby Kochamma to associate him with her humiliation. Rahel and Estha develop a bond with Velutha, while Ammu is drawn to him, sparking a forbidden romance. Velutha is depicted as sympathetic but faces tragedy due to his caste and relationship with Ammu. When Velutha's father exposes their affair, Ammu is locked up, and Velutha is banished. Ammu blames the twins for her plight, leading them to flee with their cousin Sophie. Their boat capsizes and Sophie drowns, Margaret and Chacko return to find Sophie dead on the sofa.

It didn't matter that the story had begun, because Kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings.

—The God of Small Things

Baby Kochamma accuses Velutha of Sophie's death, leading to his brutal beating and arrest by the police. The twins witness this traumatic event. Chief of police aware of Velutha's Communist ties, fears unrest if the wrongful arrest is exposed. He threatens Baby Kochamma for falsely accusing Velutha. To save herself, Baby Kochamma manipulates Estha and Rahel into implicating Velutha in Sophie's murder. Velutha dies from his injuries. Despite Ammu's attempts to tell the truth, Baby Kochamma convinces Chacko that Ammu and the twins are responsible for Sophie's death. Chacko ejects Ammu from the house, separating Estha from her forever. Ammu dies alone in a motel at 31. Rahel moves to America for university but returns to Ayemenem after a tumultuous life. She reunites with Estha, who has lived a solitary, mute existence with Baby Kochamma. Despite their reunion, their lives remain sorrowful. The novel concludes with a reflection on Ammu and Velutha's love affair.

## Characters

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- Estha, Rahel's twin brother, a serious, intelligent, and somewhat nervous child, who experiences trauma leading to his silence, chosen by Baby Kochamma to accuse Velutha, deeply connected to his sister despite separation.
- Rahel, Estha's younger sister by 18 minutes, a partial narrator characterized as intelligent and impulsive, grappling with social discomfort and treated as lesser than her brother, later becoming something of a drifter, training as an architectural draftsman, and experiencing a failed relationship with an American.
- Ammu, the twins' strict mother, who marries to escape her alcoholic husband, divorces him due to violence, and has a cataclysmic affair with Velutha, causing her children to fear losing her love.
- Velutha, smart Paravan caste carpenter at the Ipe family's pickle factory, deeply involved in the local Communist movement, who has a forbidden affair with Ammu and faces brutal punishment, with a paralyzed brother named Kuttapen.
- Chacko, Estha and Rahel's maternal uncle, who meets Margaret at Oxford, marries her, and has a daughter, Sophie, whose death is pivotal to the story.
- Baby Kochamma, The twins' maternal great aunt, educated and embittered, harboring unrequited love for an Irish Catholic priest and spite for her niece's children, condemning them to misery.

## Techniques

Roy uses various techniques to represent the children's viewpoints and their innocence. One technique she employs is the capitalization of certain words and phrases to give them significance (for example, "Because Anything Can Happen To Anyone"). The children also restate things that adults say in a phonetic way, separating and recombining words. This echoes the children's way of looking at the world, distinct from the perspective of the grown-ups who surround them. Roy often uses metaphors that feature elements that are more prominent in the lives of children, such as toothpaste, secrets, or portable pianos. They place significance on words and ideas differently from the adults, thereby creating a new way of viewing the world around them. They pick up on certain feelings and ideas that the adults around them either fail or refuse to recognize, and give new significance to things that the adults ignore for their own purposes. The children use and repeat these phrases throughout the story so that the phrases themselves gain independence and representational meanings. Another way she plays with language is to join words together without punctuation, which we see in the description of the 'Orangedrink Lemondrink man' or 'bluegreyblue eyes'. This subversion of the usual rules of syntax and grammar not only places us in a child's view of the world, but it also draws attention to the role of language in colonialism. By corrupting standard use of English (the colonial language of India) Roy is rebelling against colonial influence still present in India, represented by characters such as Margaret Kochamma and Chacko who always speak correctly.[4,5,6]

Roy also employs a disjointed, non-sequential narrative style that echoes the process of memory, especially the resurfacing of a previously suppressed, painful memory. The story of three different generations is told simultaneously going back and forth in time.<sup>[1]</sup>

The uncovering of the story of Sophie's death, concurrently with the forward-moving story of Rahel's return to Ayemenem and reunion with Estha, creates a complex narrative that emphasizes the difficulty of the subject of the story and the complexity of the culture from which the story originates. Time is rendered somewhat static as parts of one narrative line are intertwined through repetition and non-sequential discovery. This is also part of the way Roy uses real-life places and people that she has shifted and altered for use in the story. The story's many elements come together to construct a diverse look at one instance of Indian culture and the effect of the caste system on life and love during a time of post-colonialism. As the children try to form their own identities, naming and renaming themselves in the process, Roy places in parallel the effect of the process by intertwining the past and the present.

This process also echoes the progression of the Indian people, like that of all cultures that try to find ways to maintain their traditions in a time of increasing globalization.

## Possible autobiographical elements

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The God of Small Things is a work of fiction but some critics have tried to find autobiographical parallels in the novel, while at the same, warning against drawing any simplistic connections between the novel and the writer's life.<sup>[2]</sup> Some of





the similarities between Roy's life and that of the characters she creates include her own Syrian Christian and Hindu lineage; the divorce of her parents when she and her brother were very young; her return to the family home in Ayemenem after her mother's divorce; and her education in an architectural school, to name a few.<sup>[2]</sup> Some critics also attribute the political awareness manifested in *The God of Small Things* to Roy's early life-influences from her mother, who was an activist and feminist.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### Reception

*The God of Small Things* received stellar reviews in major American newspapers such as *The New York Times* (a "dazzling first novel",<sup>[3]</sup> "extraordinary", "at once so morally strenuous and so imaginatively supple"<sup>[4]</sup>) and the *Los Angeles Times* ("a novel of poignancy and considerable sweep"<sup>[5]</sup>), and in Canadian publications such as the *Toronto Star* ("a lush, magical novel"<sup>[6]</sup>). *Time* named it one of the best books of the year.<sup>[7]</sup> Critical response in the United Kingdom was less positive, and the awarding of the Booker Prize caused controversy; Carmen Callil, a 1996 Booker Prize judge, called the novel "execrable", and *The Guardian* described the contest as "profoundly depressing".<sup>[8]</sup> In India, the book was criticised especially for its unrestrained description of sexuality by E. K. Nayanar,<sup>[9]</sup> then Chief Minister of Roy's home state Kerala, where she had to answer charges of obscenity.<sup>[10]</sup> The book has since been translated into Malayalam by Priya A. S., under the title *Kunju Karyangalude Odeythampuran*.<sup>[11]</sup><sup>[12]</sup> Some critics have pointed out that the reader reviews of this book on bookseller websites are so extremely opposed at times that it is difficult to imagine readers are saying this about the same book.<sup>[13]</sup>

In 2014, the novel was ranked in *The Telegraph* as one of the 10 all-time greatest Asian novels.<sup>[14]</sup> On 5 November 2019, the BBC News listed *The God of Small Things* on its list of the 100 most influential novels.<sup>[15]</sup> Emma Lee-Potter of *The Independent* listed it as one of the 12 best Indian novels.<sup>[16]</sup>

In 2020, the novel was included on the "Big Jubilee Read" list of 70 books by Commonwealth authors, selected to celebrate the Platinum Jubilee of Elizabeth II.<sup>[17]</sup>

#### DISCUSSION

The events of *The God of Small Things* are revealed in a fragmentary manner, mostly jumping back and forth between scenes in 1969 and 1993, with backstory scattered throughout. The story centers around the wealthy, land-owning, Syrian Christian Ipe family of Ayemenem, a town in Kerala, India. Most of the plot occurs in 1969, focusing on the seven-year-old twins Estha and Rahel, who live with their mother Ammu, their grandmother Mammachi, their uncle Chacko, and their great-aunt Baby Kochamma.

In the backstory before 1969, Mammachi was married to Pappachi, an Imperial Entomologist who beat her cruelly. By 1969 Pappachi is dead and Mammachi is blind. Behind her house is the Meenachal River and her pickle factory, Paradise Pickles & Preserves. Baby Kochamma is a bitter, jealous old woman who unrequitedly loved an Irish missionary. Chacko went to Oxford and married Margaret Kochamma, an English woman. They had a daughter, Sophie Mol, and then Margaret left Chacko for a man named Joe. Chacko returned to Ayemenem and took over the pickle factory. Ammu married Baba, trying to escape Ayemenem, but Baba turned out to be an abusive alcoholic. After the twins were born the two separated and Ammu moved back to Ayemenem. In the wider society of Kerala, the Communist Party is gaining power and threatens to overthrow landlords like the Ipes. The Ipes live near an Untouchable (an inferior caste) family that includes Velutha, a young man who works for Chacko and is beloved by the twins.

The main action centers around Sophie Mol's visit to Ayemenem. Joe dies in an accident, and Chacko invites Margaret Kochamma to Ayemenem for the holidays. Estha, Rahel, Ammu, Chacko, and Baby Kochamma make a trip to the airport, and on the way their car is trapped by a Communist march. The family then goes to see *The Sound of Music*, and Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, a vendor at the theater. The next day Sophie and Margaret arrive, and the family returns to Ayemenem.

Estha fears that the Orangedrink Man will come for him, so he and Rahel find a boat and row across the river to the "History House," the abandoned home of an Englishman who "went native." The twins set up a hideout there. Meanwhile Ammu dreams about Velutha, and that night she and Velutha meet by the river and have sex. They continue to meet every night for the next two weeks.

Finally Vellya Paapen (Velutha's father) comes to Mammachi and confesses his son's relationship with Ammu. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma lock Ammu in her room, where she screams that the twins are "millstones" around her neck. The twins decide to run away to the History House, and Sophie Mol comes with them. Their boat tips over as they cross the river and Sophie Mol drowns. The twins reach shore and, terrified, fall asleep in the History House, unaware that Velutha is there too.

Baby Kochamma goes to the police, telling Inspector Thomas Mathew that Velutha tried to rape Ammu and kidnapped the children. Six policemen find Velutha and beat him brutally in front of Estha and Rahel. When Mathew finds out that Velutha is innocent, he threatens to charge Baby Kochamma. Terrified for herself, she convinces Estha to “save Ammu” by telling the police that Velutha killed Sophie Mol. Velutha dies in jail that night. After Sophie Mol’s funeral Baby Kochamma convinces Chacko to throw Ammu out of the house, and Ammu is then forced to “return” Estha to Baba.

The twins are separated for twenty-three years, during which Estha stops speaking altogether. When he is thirty-one Baba “re-returns” him to Ayemenem. Meanwhile Rahel is kicked out of many schools, and Ammu dies when Rahel is eleven. Rahel marries an American and lives in Boston, but then gets divorced and returns to Ayemenem when she hears Estha is there.

The twins are reunited in 1993. Mammachi has died and Baby Kochamma and the cook, Kochu Maria, spend all day watching TV as the house falls apart. The History House has become a five-star hotel. Rahel and Estha (who still doesn’t speak) sift through some old trinkets and notebooks and end up reaffirming their closeness by having sex.

### III.RESULTS

The narrator introduces Ayemenem, a small town in Kerala, India, and describes the humid jungle and the monsoons that come in June. In 1993 Rahel Ipe is returning to her childhood home in Ayemenem, where her great-aunt Navomi Ipe (whom everyone calls Baby Kochamma) still lives. Rahel has come back see her “dizygotic” twin Estha, who she hasn’t seen in twenty-three years. As children Rahel and Estha didn’t look alike, but they always thought of themselves as a single person in separate bodies, and they share certain memories and dreams that only one twin experienced.[7,8,9]

The story will be told in fragments, mostly jumping between scenes in 1969 (focusing on Sophie Mol’s visit) and 1993, when the twins are reunited at age thirty-one. This style, focusing on small moments broken apart and examined separately, connects to the theme of “small things” in the novel. “Kochamma” is a female honorific title, not an actual name.

After their long separation, however, the twins are now distinct individuals and strangers from each other. The narrator describes their birth. The twins’ parents, Baba and Ammu, were driving to the hospital when their car broke down, so they had to take a bus. Estha and Rahel were almost born in the bus, and later they wished they had been, as they got the idea that it would mean free bus passes for life.

The relationship between Estha and Rahel is one of the most important of the book, as they think of themselves as a single entity, but then have different experiences and are separated for years. The Ipe family is relatively well off – they have a car.

The story then jumps to 1969 (when the twins are seven years old), to the funeral for Sophie Mol, Estha and Rahel’s cousin and the daughter of their uncle Chacko, Ammu’s sister. Sophie was visiting from England when she died. At the funeral Ammu, Estha, and Rahel are made to stand apart from the rest of the mourners. Rahel imagines that Sophie Mol is still alive in her coffin, showing Rahel the ceiling of the church. Rahel imagines a man falling from the ceiling and dying, and she thinks of other “breaking men” and a smell like “old roses.” Rahel then watches a bat climb up Baby Kochamma’s sari, and she sees Sophie Mol cartwheel in her coffin while everyone is distracted.

Roy creates tension by basically revealing the end (Sophie Mol will die) at the beginning, and then jumping back and forth in time to slowly reveal how this comes to pass. “Mol” is a term meaning “girl,” and again “Kochamma” is an honorific – Roy’s style of free indirect discourse involves telling the story partly through the eyes of the young twins, so these characters (and others, like Ammu) are only named in the way the twins refer to them. Rahel clearly has a very active imagination that allows her to avoid confronting tragedy.

After the funeral Ammu and the twins go to the police station, and Ammu asks to see someone named Velutha. Thomas Mathew, the police inspector, calls Ammu a veshya (prostitute) and threatens her if she doesn’t go home quietly. Ammu leaves and starts to cry, and Estha helps her onto a bus and hugs her.

There is more to this “ending” than just Sophie Mol’s death, as Ammu has been socially disgraced in some way. The story starts out very confusingly, but Roy gives out enough information to keep up the tension.

Two weeks after that, Estha was “Returned” – sent to live with his father (the twins parents are divorced) in Calcutta. Soon afterward he began to grow quieter and quieter until he stopped speaking altogether. The quietness helped him erase the words describing his painful memories, and he began to take long walks around the neighborhood. Twenty-



three years later, Baba has “re-returned” Estha to Ayemenem, and now Estha walks around the old familiar places of the village. Since Rahel has returned, however, the quietness in Estha’s head has been broken by the sounds of memories.

We first see the results of whatever trauma occurred around Sophie Mol’s death. The twins, who considered themselves as almost one person, are separated for years, and Estha retreats into silence to avoid his terrible memories. Roy capitalizes and emphasizes certain phrases that linger in the childrens’ consciousness (like Estha being “Returned”), as part of her style of presenting the world as the twins perceive it.

#### Family and Social Obligation Theme Icon Change vs. Preservation Theme Icon

The story then follows Rahel after her separation from Estha. She lived with her uncle Chacko and grandmother Mammachi in Ayemenem during the summers, where the “Loss of Sophie Mol” still remained long after the memory of Sophie Mol herself faded. Meanwhile Rahel drifted from school to school, get expelled for different strange reasons like stealing a teacher’s wig and purposefully crashing into other students. Basically she was exercising her curiosity about the world, as no one was around to raise her or teach her about life.

“The Loss of Sophie Mol” is a separate entity from Sophie Mol herself, which introduces the theme of preservation. Whatever traumatic events occurred in 1969 have lingered on in the Ayemenem House, despite Estha’s attempts to silence them. Rahel kept her curiosity and active imagination, but both twins act like “lost souls” without the other around.

#### Family and Social Obligation Theme Icon Change vs. Preservation Theme Icon

Rahel eventually went to an architecture college in Delhi, where she stayed for eight years without ever graduating. There she met Larry McCaslin, an American student, and she married him and moved to Boston. Eventually he grew weary of her constant detachment and depression, as she watched horrible things happening in India and always felt an emptiness where Estha used to be. They were divorced, and then Rahel heard that Estha had come back to Ayemenem, so she returned as well.

Roy also attended architecture college, and also grew up in Kerala with a brother of similar age. Later the narrator will characterize the adult Estha as “Quietness” and the adult Rahel as “Emptiness,” both of them lost without the other. The personal trauma of the Ipe family is also shown as just a fragment of the political upheaval happening in India.

#### Indian Politics, Society, and Class Theme Icon Love and Sexuality Theme Icon

Baby Kochamma, who is now eighty-three, is pleased that Estha doesn’t speak to Rahel when they interact now, and she gets no special treatment from him. Baby Kochamma doesn’t like the twins, and she wishes they would leave soon, as they make her uncomfortable. In her old age she has started wearing all of Mammachi’s jewelry at once and putting on lots of makeup.

Baby Kochamma will be an antagonist to the twins and Ammu. Each of the family members struggle with social obligation, love, and personal dislike in their relationships, but Baby Kochamma always puts her own well-being first. With her makeup and jewelry, Baby Kochamma is just another thing being “preserved” in Ayemenem.

#### Family and Social Obligation Theme Icon Change vs. Preservation Theme Icon

When she was eighteen, Baby Kochamma fell in love with an Irish monk named Father Mulligan. Father Mulligan would visit Baby Kochamma’s father, who was a reverend in the Syrian Christian community (and famous for once having been blessed by the Patriarch of Antioch), and Baby Kochamma would make up questions about the Bible as an excuse to talk to him. Then she started performing charitable actions to impress him, but nothing ever came of it.

The Patriarch of Antioch is the head of the Syrian Christian Church. Though Baby Kochamma has a tragic backstory of unrequited love, even in her youth she was very self-centered – using her Christianity and charitable acts only as a means of seeming like a good person to society and Father Mulligan.

#### Indian Politics, Society, and Class Theme Icon Love and Sexuality Theme Icon

Eventually Father Mulligan left Kerala and Baby Kochamma followed him to Madras, defying her father and becoming a Roman Catholic. She joined a convent, but soon realized she would hardly ever see Father Mulligan, so she sent for her father to fetch her. Her father knew she was unlikely to find a husband now, so he sent her to school to study Ornamental



Gardening. Baby Kochamma never stopped loving Father Mulligan from afar, but she stayed in Ayemenem, grew very fat, and spent all her time gardening.

Roy will often criticize the patriarchal system of India, where a man-less woman has basically wasted her life and is seen as worthless. Baby Kochamma sticks with the status quo and allows herself to decline without a husband, spending all her time mourning and preserving Father Mulligan's memory, as well as indulging in her own personal grudges and jealousy.

Family and Social Obligation Theme Icon Indian Politics, Society, and Class Theme Icon Change vs. Preservation Theme Icon[10,11,12]

Almost fifty years later Baby Kochamma discovered television, and since then her garden has been abandoned. She and Kochu Maria, the house cook, watch American TV shows all day and enter all the contests they see. Baby Kochamma has also grown very paranoid, and she keeps her doors, windows, and even her refrigerator locked.

Roy will later comment that Baby Kochamma's paranoia is based in the fear of "being displaced" – the Ipe family is of an upper class of landowners, and Baby Kochamma is the type to cling to old class divisions and fear any kind of social change.

Indian Politics, Society, and Class Theme Icon Change vs. Preservation Theme Icon

Baby Kochamma questions Rahel suspiciously, but Rahel ignores her. Rahel looks out at the old pickle factory, Paradise Pickles & Preserves, which sits between the house and the river. Mammachi used to run it and make a variety of preserved products, including banana jam, which was officially illegal as it could not be categorized as either jam or jelly. Rahel thinks about how this difficulty with classification is the source of many of her family's troubles, as they all broke some kind of social rule.

The pickle factory is an important symbol of the theme of preservation, as the Ipes (especially Mammachi, the pickle maker) preserve old traditions and class divisions. Even Mammachi makes banana jam, however – suggesting that none of the Ipes could stick to the status quo, and this ultimately led to tragedy. Roy just hasn't said what kind of tragedy yet.

Family and Social Obligation Theme Icon Indian Politics, Society, and Class Theme Icon Change vs. Preservation Theme Icon Small Things Theme Icon

The story jumps back to 1969, after Sophie Mol's death, when Baby Kochamma acted self-righteously pious even though much of the trouble was her fault. Ammu consulted a "Twin Expert" about separating her children, and the expert said that it would be okay to send Estha away. So Estha took the train to Madras and then to Calcutta, still haunted by the face of a beat-up young man and the smell of old roses.[13,14,15]

#### IV.CONCLUSIONS

We still don't know what Baby Kochamma has done, but she already appears as a negative character because of her self-righteousness, laziness, and jealousy. She clearly puts herself and the "family name" above the actual other members of the family. Certain small things – like the smell of old roses – signify big things and lingering memories.

The narrator steps back, musing that "things can change in a day," and that little, seemingly ordinary things can add up to life-changing events. The story potentially began with Sophie Mol's arrival in India, but the narrator says that it also could have begun centuries before, when the Hindu caste system was laid down, including the "Love Laws." [16,17]

The novel contains a contradictory mix of "small things" – the little moments and objects that Roy uses to build up a story, and a writing style that takes a childlike view of a brutal world – and "big things," like the ancient caste system and political turmoil in India. Despite the family's attempts at preservation, "things can change in a day" is one of the novel's most frequent refrains.[18]

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