

Sensibility of the Novel “The God of Small Things” Personifies Realities where Meaning Plays the Protagonist

Imam Alam Khan^{1*}

¹ King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

* Imam Alam Khan, Email: eakhan@kau.edu.sa

Abstract

The novel, “The God of Small Things”, is a Booker Prize winner fiction. It is obviously a thought-provoking novel with an apparent viewpoint. It is a novel by Arundhati Roy, an Indian writer. The novel is a story of stories where conflicting ideas of various subjects play vital roles. The subjects appear to be really striking. The style is marvelous. The plot construction is excellent, and the characterization is superb. Language is unique. It’s a worldwide acclaimed novel. The novel speaks on subjects like love, madness, joy, cast-discrimination, women’s exploitation and most importantly the conflict between the Laltain (lantern), the big people, and Mombatti (candles), the small people, which represent the class antagonism. All these antagonisms transform into a meaning. The novelist projects so many meanings together and tries to weave a story on Ammu, the protagonist of the novel. She has created a world where the readers feel the conflict between the social antagonisms and emotional meanings. The novelist, Arundhati Roy, has tried her best to evolve a literal as well as a figurative meaning of emotions. The readers feel spellbound emotions when they start reading the novel and pass through the strong throng until they finish the novel. The novelist succeeds in making her readers feel a trance. They emotionally find themselves in a pang of emotions which remains until the end of the novel. Though the novel is full of many obscurities where the readers fail to understand the obscure images and local languages in the novel, yet they feel satisfaction at the end as it discusses sensibility of the society. The reality apparently transforms itself into a crystal clear meaning of life which is very vital to the novelist as well as to the readers. The meaning of life, reality, appears like a protagonist. Hence, the novel under research is under scrutiny about the idea of reality appearing like protagonist. It is undoubtedly a very successful novel. Readers have liked it very much. The critics have found it interesting. It has been the best seller, too. Thus, this research is trying to find out the answer of the question, Is the novel really successful in arousing a sensibility? Is the meaning of life appears life-like? Does it personify reality of life? Consequently, this research paper has tried to find out the answers for the posted queries. Moreover, the obvious answer is, yes it does. It personifies the realities of the tragedies of the protagonists: Ammu and Velutha.

Keywords

sensibility, reality, feeling, emotion, society, antagonism, love, death

1. Introduction

The novel, “The God of Small Things”, is all about the central character of the novel, Ammu. Ammu’s life has been portrayed right from her childhood to her youth, and till her tragic death. She has been troubled since her childhood, and all through her life. She has been humiliated. She has been subjected to all cruelties inflicted by her father, mother, and, of course, her own husband. The husband of Ammu tries to trade her modesty. He seeks out to send her to his boss to quench his lustful carnal desire to save his job. Being very much sensitive, Ammu doesn’t come up with the situation. She can’t like the mean idea of her husband as well. She can never bear this attitude of a person who happens to be her husband. Hence, she divorces her husband and comes back to her father’s house. The feelings and emotions of Ammu, the protagonist of the novel, present a contemptuous situation for the readers. The situation gets even worse when she reaches her parents’ house. She isn’t welcomed whole heartedly. Her close relatives appear like strangers to her. They don’t show any sympathy for her, or even for her tender children. The readers feel a kind of sensibility. The tragic sensibility of the novel appears like real and life-like. The situation creates the same feeling as the tragic characters of Shakespeare arouse in the minds and hearts of the readers. The unlimited sensitivity of the feelings in the character of Ammu creates an unlimited suppleness, “as prose is a mode of expression of unlimited suppleness” (Legouis & Cazamian, 2012, p. 843).

The novel has got a truly architectural shape of characterization. Words have been coined in a very new and liberal way. The language has been twisted in a way where it symbolizes meaning as well as it gets easy to convey the correct feelings. Almost every page of the novel has so beautifully been woven and composed that the readers start feeling the emotional equivalent (Eliot) and the readers feel jerk and jolt. They feel a relation between “who suffers and the mind which creates” (Eliot, 1974, p. 21).

Ammu, the protagonist of the novel, is left alone after she divorces her husband and comes back to Kerala, Ayemenem House. This is her father’s ancestral house. She is just twenty-four. She would have enjoyed her marital pleasure and happiness of life, yet she is at the mercy of the people who have been mocking at her every moment. She keeps herself alone with the solitude of the bank of the river. She has a midnight swim to subdue her carnal desire. This swimming at midnight arouses the sensibility of the readers and keeps them busy to go through the whole story. The river itself signifies the meaning of the novel. And, the story is a series of stories which go parallel in the novel. Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, a paravan or untouchable, grows beyond boundaries. She starts liking him and then loving him. They start loving each other, which they consider love but people in the family consider that she has defiled generations of breeding and brought family to its knees, because Ammu has a relation with an untouchable, Velutha. And, this can never happen in a family of upper caste. This is an antagonism of the society, which has been hit hardly by the novelist. The love-relationship between an upper caste lady who has divorced her husband and living alone with an untouchable, can never find a place in the society, and can never be recommended. Hence, the fatal flaw of the protagonist is that she loves an untouchable. Now, the tragic end of the protagonist begins to take its shape. Her lovemaking is

considered illicit by the society and she is completely rejected. After being subject to all insults and abuses, torture and pain, and torments, she leaves Ayemenem House, and breathes her last “in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Allepy where she..., she died alone” (The God of Small Things, p. 161).

“A platoon of ants carried a dead cockroach sedately through the door, demonstrating what should be done with corpse” (The God of Small Things, p. 162).

The above quoted lines remind me of the situation of the novel, “Aissa Saved”, by Joyce Cary where Aissa is eaten up alive by ants. There is a resemblance of the sequence of the injustice, which causes sufferings a lot. In fine, a conclusion should be made. “Ammu, without her knowledge, becomes instrumental in precipitating the tragedy which confronts two generations of Ayemenem House” (Surendran, 2013, p. 26).

2. Discussion

The name of the novel “The God of Small Things” appears to be very stylish. It tells stories of one very fractured and unhappy family from the southernmost state of India, Kerala. Secrets of all the characters unfold in a surprising manner. The characters have been shown unhappy in the novel. The remarkable thing about the novel is that the novelist has tried her best to give very subtle twists to the incidents with a significant precision in the language. The incorporation of the incidents convincingly conveys the “meaning” of the novel. This meaning suggests the “objective correlative” in the words of T. S. Eliot. As put in the words of the novelist herself, “constructing my book was actually an architectural thing”. The novel’s sensibility passes through the poetic grandeur of the simple linguistic use and poetic exuberance.

It is a successful novel. It holds an artistic fusion of form as well as of emotional context. And, this blend is essential to make a novel successful. It is very close to “Madame Bovary” with regard to its careful organization, and it is very much adjacent to “Wuthering Heights” when love for theme is concerned. Its affinity with the African novel “Aissa Saved” can be connected where the vision of life, sensibility, is fully developed. The novelist appears to be fully engrossed with her sense of meaning of life as well as of intuition. The meaning of life emerges cropping-up in consonance with her intuition. Here, her intuition belongs to her attitude towards life, which naturally gets the form of the theme, and this leads her to creation of this work of art, the novel, “The God of Small Things”. The theme is the core of the writer’s subject. It is the unifying idea without which “it is impossible for a book to have a form” (Cary, 1958, p. 112).

The novelist’s idea of life is unique, and the storyline is excellent. The novelist never starts with literature in mind, rather starts with an idea of life, the meaning, or sensibility. The novel here does fit the norm of the novel and goes deeper and deeper to explore the meanings of the lives in the characters of the novel. The novelist tries to construct definite views of life which drive human beings to certain action, thoughts and beliefs. Consequently, specific actions, thoughts and beliefs have found the beautiful narration in the novel, “The God of Small Things”.

The novelist in the present novel, “The God of Small Things”, appears to be the omniscient narrator, and this omniscient narrator is intrusive in nature. Hence, she efficiently intrudes into the minds’ of the characters and thus the narration has effectively been put into subtle stories. The novel appears to have unconventional theme of story where each character has to tell a story. In addition, story envelops everything. It’s a story of forbidden class-caste love between Ammu and Velutha, The Kochamma family business which appears to be very much emblematic of the theme of the novel. It appears that the story visibly portrays the confrontations between the haves and have not of the society, between high strata, mighty people and the low strata, and weak people of the society. Two images, Laltain (lantern) and Mombatti (candles) have been used to present the whole sequence of the story. Through these symbolic representations the novelist has effectively been able to arouse the pity, the feeling of the readers for the helpless Mombattis, the weak people of the society. Ammu and Velutha, the god of small things, are the Mombattis put up against the Laltain, the god of big things, which include Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chako, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew. Hence, the novel narrates the sensibility in its own background. It testifies the loyalty over self-interests and emotions, which eventually appears that self-interests and emotions are put over loyalty in the story.

Let’s go through the glimpses of the story portraying different views of life and on various aspects of life. After Ammu died, Rahel spent her holidays largely ignored by Chako and Mammachi, who had “grown soft with sorrow” (The God of Small Things, p. 15).

Ammu, Estha and Rahel have been portrayed as transgressors for they broke rules. “it was a time when ... the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened” (The God of Small Things, p. 31).

Velutha had a view with machines. Mammachi often said that if only he hadn’t been a Paravan (untouchable), he might have become an engineer.

The novelist comments, “with impenetrable Touchable logic” (The God of Small Things, p. 75).

The novelist comments, “her body on his. He might never see her again. Where was she? What had they done to her. Had they hurt her?” (The God of Small Things, pp. 285-286).

Another comments, “if he loved her he couldn’t leave” (The God of Small Things, p. 330).

The above cited sentences from the novel help us to know the characters more closely, where point of view effectively finds ways to arouse subtle feelings of life through irony and satires. “at the same time the good novel doesn’t simply convey life: it says something of life; it reveals some kind of pattern in life; it brings significance” (Kettle, 1967, p. 13).

The novel in question tries to expose the chaotic problems of the downtrodden people of the society. And, the novelist seems to be very much sympathetic with the neglected and underprivileged people. She has tried a revolutionary portrayal of the absolute neglected poor with regard to their insult by the rich. She strongly pleads the cause of the poor, earnestly believes in the theory of peace and harmony. She appears to be very close to P B Shelley when she believes that the poet must be the “unacknowledged legislator” of mankind. Like G B Shaw, she harbors the opinion that the world can

become paradise if some of the evils of society are uprooted. Hence, the novelist in this novel has tried her best to legislate the different kinds of sensibilities in her writing to arouse a sensible feeling towards the feelings of the neglected people. The writer rightly opines, “a nation’s life has its moods of exultation and depression; ... the dominant spirit of the hour, ... will directly or indirectly reveal itself in his words” (Hudson, 2004, p. 248).

Let’s try to discuss the life and premature death of Sophie Mol. She happens to be one of the most important persons of the novel. And, her character which proves that, “a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetime” (The God of Small Things, p. 32). She visits Ayemenem from London to recover from the shock of her father, of course not the real one. Fortunately, she finds playmates with whom she runs through her time ecstatically. It was really fortunate to her. However, she dies in a boat accident, which turned into a tragedy as she dies. This is the turning point of the novel. It involves almost all important characters in the novel. This tragedy leads to the absolute collapse of the family. It is a chaotic disintegration of the Ayemenem family, which has been known for glory. “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” (The God of Small Things, p. 5). The family-bond starts here to disintegrate slowly. The plot takes its shape here and story starts growing. The readers feel keen and goes on reading the rest of the novel. However, they, readers, feel sensible enough to finish the novel. Thus here is the binding force of the sensibility, the meaning of the novel lies. The feelings of the readers move simultaneously with that of the novelist. That’s the triumph of the novelist when she succeeds to make impressions, and sensibility gets appearance as the main theme of the novel.

Let’s try to understand the theme of the story. The story of the novel in question revolves round the “haves and have nots”. This is the very sensibility around which whole plot runs and story goes on impressing readers where readers find the characters very close to them and their heart. The readers here find the theme very much to their own taste and temperament. They feel that they are enacting themselves in the very interesting plot of the novel. Hence, the author is very close to the heart, the feelings and experiences of the readers with her sensibility of the portrayal of the characters, which are flats as well as round in the nature. The characters in the novel move in the pages and through the pages like living beings and find a place in the memories of the readers. Here, the words of Walter Allen can be put when he holds the view, “a novel is a totality, made up of all the words in it, and it must be judged as a totality” (Allen, 1954, p. XVIII). Therefore, the novel has efficiently been able to arouse the sensibility of the readers.

Let me try the character of Baby Kochamma. She appears to be a sadist character. Her character is a round character in the novel. She undergoes very many changes. She plays the villain. She is a mélange of villainy as well as of tyranny. She is a perfect villain in the lives of Ammu, the protagonist, Estha, Rahel and Velutha, the male protagonist of the novel. She appears to be isolated, deserted and frustrated in her life. She harbors her love for Father Mulligan, and keeps no stone unturned to draw his attention (love), yet she fails miserably. Thus, she undergoes changes. Her inner being gets tormented. Her

struggle for the love of the Father gets shattered and she finds frustration as her intention to torture people. It is her frustration, which makes her crush the innocence of the weak people, “the Mombattis”. She appears to be, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” in the words of Shakespeare in *Macbeth*. At the very onset of the novel, she has been described, “sitting at the dining table rubbing the thick frothy bitterness out of an elderly cucumber” (*The God of Small Things*, p. 20). The very narration about Baby Kochamma shows the very shades of her sensibility. She has always been elderly, bitter, frothing and fuming with anger. She appears to live her life backward, too. She is an old lady now, yet she wishes to set the fashion like Mrs. Malaprop of Sheridan’s “*The Rivals*”. “And because the house was locked and dark, her lipstick mouth had shifted slightly off her real mouth” (*The God of Small Things*, p. 21). She appears to be a very complex character which has several shades of sadistic approach of life. “Baby Kochamma, the “Ex-Nun” in *The God of Small Things* surprises us with her actions and in this sense she is certainly a round character”, says K. V. Surendran in his book, “*The God of Small Things; A Saga of Lost Dreams*” (Surendran, 2013, p. 108). The present novel, “*The God of Small Things*” is a novel of thought provoking sensibility, which appears to be social consciousness, also. It is a confrontation between the big and the small people of the society, where thought is provoked and sensibility is aroused to show that the world exists with a sense. In one of her interviews, the novelist herself holds the view, “Fiction for me has been a way of trying to make sense of the world as I know it” (Roy, 1997, p. 26).

This very sensibility of this character is unique and exception. Let me talk about the characterization of the novel in the question. The imagination of a novel is said to be the experiences of the novelist. That’s why the characterizations find the same place and persona as they have been experienced and thereafter visualized. This visualization gets form of a novel which is like aroma of life spreading in and around the atmosphere. And, the maturity of characterization depends on the storyline of the novel. It presents the untold miseries of so many characters. It shows the undeserved sufferings of the feminine characters so sharply that appears to the readers that they are witnessing themselves, or sometimes they feel that they are experiencing silently as they go through the pages of the novels. Consequently, the novel “*The God of Small Things*” exhibits an exceptional blend of feelings of the characters with the form of the novel. It has a fine cut into the matter with situational craftsmanship manner. Dr. Prasad says about the theme of the novel, “it is not a ‘turning loose of emotions’ but a realistic, deliberate and conscious portrayal of the various social maladies inflicting the modern commercial civilization” (Prasad, 2004, p. 261).

In terms of delineating the society which she knows well or which she projects through the alembic process of imagination, the novelist does not, like Jane Austen, the last exquisite blossom of the 18th century, deal with the elementary social problems of love and marriage on a limited scale. The art of Arundhati Roy, unlike that of Jane Austen, is more than a needlework, for she prefers mountains to monuments. Besides, she does not sacrifice monuments in favor of mountains; rather the gamut of his literary activities includes both mountains and monuments. It proceeds from the artistic belief of the

novelist that she can maneuver her materials in short stories which demand powerful concentration on the delineation or exploration of character with as much ease and success as in novels where the novelist has to analyze the motives and passion of what E. M. Forster calls “people” in a wider perspective. Hence, the people and their so-called sensibility have been projected brilliantly. They look life-like. They touch the very core of the hearts of the readers.

Let me try the protagonists of the novel: Ammu and Velutha.

Ammu, the female protagonist, is a character who has been seen tortured and abused by everyone around her. Her father, mother, brother, aunt in her family, and the police and politics, in the outside world have been involved in her tragic end. They are the real culprits. As a child, she saw the cruel behavior of her father. Her mother denied her the proper education because being a girl child. Her husband, an alcoholic, wished to trade her modesty. That is what she doesn’t like. She leaves her husband in frenzy. She is not received well by her parents and others. Her brother behaves with her in a very inhumanly way.

Ammu, out of frustration and incessant sufferings, finds a place in the heart of Velutha, a paravan, an untouchable, the male protagonist of the novel. The untouchability, a sensibility with which the novelist takes her novel to the tragic end, gets instrumental to create irony as well as pathos in the novel. Velutha’s life runs into trouble when he makes physical contact with Ammu. This love between a woman of a high class, a Syrian Christian, with a person like Velutha, a socially discarded, politically neglected and physically tormented character, gets hardened. Velutha has no right to love a person like Ammu. Hence, this appears to be a transgression on the part of Velutha as well as on the part of Ammu. Velutha is caught by the police and dies a torturous death. While Ammu is left unattended, helpless and without any support, leaves Ayemenem and breathes her last. “She died alone” (The God of Small Things, p. 161).

Velutha, the paravan, or an untouchable, has been regarded as a fine craftsman, and respectfully has often been called Dr. Velutha by the family of Ammu. He earned so much respect from Ammu’s family that Mammachi, Ammu’s mother, had always said, “If only he hadn’t been a paravan, he might have become an engineer”. Even then the relationship between Ammu, a high-class woman with an untouchable, Velutha, has emerged as a villainous, uncalled for and unbearable in the family, as well as in the society. This is the sensibility of untouchability in a society which causes the tragic death of two significant people who happen to be innocent. The untouchability has been used just like Shakespeare used the handkerchief of Desdemona for her tragedy in “Othello”. The untouchability has been projected as a villainous person who can commit heinous crime in the society. This is the irony, meaning of the society of the novelist, which personifies itself and appears life-like.

Ammu’s death reminds me of “The Scarlet Letter”. The Scarlet Letter has been described as the “the story of three sinners and the consequences of their acts (David Levin, p. 12). I think Ammu plays the Hester Prynne, the publicly known “sinner”. However, Ammu is more than a tragedy. She was “Thirty one. Not old. Not Young. But a viable die-able age” (The God of Small Things, p. 3).

3. Conclusion

In a great work of art, “the artist’s aim is the assimilation of meaning into form” (Lever, p. 29). Moreover, the novelist, Arundhati Roy, has done this in her novel. She is successful in transforming her meaning into a form, which easily portrays her vision of life. Whatever be the nature of Roy’s vision of life, it is undoubtedly quite a deep one. It opens up new vistas of life to our wondering eyes. She is a thought-provoking revolutionary writer who believes in the efficacy of novel as an art, which not only pleases us but also enables us to have a better understanding of the world and human nature. The novel, “The God of Small Things”, does absorb our interest, taking us out of the routing of our work, a day life. She is convinced that life is tragic but it is worthliving. She, no doubt, believes in the tragedy of life, but she is not a pessimist because she has full faith in the imperishability of life.

Roy’s characters act in a society just like the characters of Dickens act in a social framework. Unlike the characters of Emily Bronte, Roy’s characters have social participation. They move in a society full of different kind of people, good and bad, honest and dishonest as well as civilians and criminals, and they act in a society where they live according to their notions. It presents that life is full of colors of different shape and sizes, where harmony and disharmony are the parts of the society. The novelist has a point of view here. It touches our aesthetic longingness rather than our intellect. That’s the primary aim of a great novelist. The novel is full of realities personifying different kinds of characters. The characters are full of vigor who reflect the very point of view, thought and feelings of the novelist. It communicates a vision. It presents a life. It brings a world before our eyes. In the words of W. H. Hudson, “The ethics must be wrought into the texture of the story; the philosophy must not be held in solution; the novelist must never for a moment be lost in the propagandist or preacher” (Hudson, 1986, p. 169).

The novel, “The God of Small Things”, is story of stories. It obviously appeals all. It becomes a media between the novelist’s feelings and readers. The readers feel very close to the novelist. They think as the writer thinks. Readers of any kind, general or emotional, intellectuals or ordinary people could enjoy the novel. And, that’s the beauty of the novel.

In fine, the paper has tried to prove that the novel in question and under research has so many testimonies to prove itself that it succeeds in embodying the truth, forming a meaning and arousing the sensibility of the readers. The readers find an edifice of the meaning before their eyes. The edifice appears life-like. The realities appear to be playing the protagonist, which makes the novel quite enjoyable one, and a great success. The findings of the research come to the conclude with the following words: “the art of fiction doesn’t begin until the novelist thinks of his story as matter to be shown, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself” (Percy, p. 62).

It should be concluded with the note that the novelist has put her own story, her experience, her feelings and emotions as well as her agonies into her debut novel. She has tried her best to create an edifice out of her personal experiences. And, this edifice is life-like. The realities precipitate into tragedies which protagonists as well as other characters have to suffer. Realities personify themselves as people and

walk with the characters. And, this is the success of the novel where readers feel that they are with the characters as well as with the novelist. The tragedy goes by the side of the theme of the novel. The characters have so been molded that they appear realistically life-like. The characterization is so sharp and very much close to the sentiments of the readers. Hence, catharsis incorporates the sensibility of the novel. Through the technique of “stream of consciousness” the novelist beautifully peeps into the very niche of the characters and presents many of the unnoticed shades of their lives. The novelist has enacted her personal experiences through characters or incidents. A homogenous result emerges by the infusion of the sharp plot construction and beautiful characterization. Thus, the novel obviously appears so original and personal. The novel “The God of Small Things” maintains sensibility of life throughout the novel. The realities of life ascertain the meaning of life. They have been personified here and there in the novel. And, the meaning of life appears larger than protagonists. Therefore, they obviously play the protagonists in the novel.

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