

## Mythological Overtones in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things': A Critical Exploration

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### Abstract

Myths and symbols of cultures worldwide have been the fundamental elements of literature since time immemorial. They impart narratives with layers of multiple meanings that help people understand the world and individuals at different levels. They serve as a framework for expressing complex emotions, abstract thoughts, and a society's cultural and moral values. They also help address specific universal themes related to the creation and destruction of the human world, the nature of good and evil, the relationship between human existence and divinity, etc. Scholars have repeatedly adopted various myths to have penetrating and meaningful insights into the unexplored realms and unveil several mysterious and multi-dimensional facets of human existence. They facilitate shaping the stories we know today and provide us with modern stereotypes. Symbols and myths serve as the building blocks of storytelling and impact readers' interpretation of the narratives. They transcend time and shape narratives by representing abstract ideas and complex emotions.

**Keywords-** The God of Small Things, Mythological Overtones, Arundhati Roy's, Critical Exploration

### Introduction

This paper is designed by way of an attempt to peep through Suzanna Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel 'The God of Small Things'. Set in postcolonial India, this novel navigates the subjects of forbidden love, subsequent loss, and social restrictions. The text is infused with various myths and symbols that offer deeper insights into the psychology of the characters and socio-political realities of contemporary India. The paper seeks to unveil the traces of various myth and their symbolic overtones that echo in the relentless and heart-rending tragedies of its characters like unfortunate Ammu, Velutha, children, and others. These tragedies on "small things" get inhumanly designed and brutally engineered by the gods of big things. The gods of big things represent the "inexorable and deterministic force" (Kearney 117) of social hegemony. The inherent cultural patterns of Ayemenem society are supported by its four pillars – Religion, Caste, Police, and Marx. Arundhati Roy's use of myths and their symbolic overtones questions and deconstructs the hegemony of the powerful in Ayemenem society. It also provides an alternative vision to witness the painful experiences of marginalized individuals.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is replete with mythological symbols and allusions. The first instance of myth comes into play when Rahel and Estha attend a traditional Kathakali dance drama performance. It serves as a cultural symbol and a powerful narrative device. It also symbolizes the drama of human existence and the eternal conflict between good and evil. Kathakali dancers are performing the scenes from Mahabharata in the temple theatre. They enact Karna's meeting with his mother, Kunti. Karna, born to Kunti and Sun god Surya, was an abandoned and deprived child, much like Rahel and Estha. Karna was not accepted and suffered social stigma because of being an illegitimate child. Like Karna, they are also subalterns suffering from a dysfunctional family. Like Karna, Ammu and her children are also pushed to the margin and punished for violating the socio-cultural codes. Thus,

this scene has a continual interplay between reality and myth. Karna's plight can also be compared to that of Velutha. Velutha also faces discrimination despite being skilled and talented. The difference between these two is that Karna has to raise disturbing questions about his discrimination and unfortunate predicament. However, Velutha has no agency and lacks the voice of protest. By paralleling his story with Karna's, Arundhati Roy critiques the deeply ingrained caste system and the oppressive social norms that dictate the lives of her characters. The killing of Dushasana by Bhima in the play also serves as reminiscent of the brutal dragging and merciless killing of hapless Velutha by the police.

The Meenachal River, which flows through Ayemenem, is one of the most powerful symbols because it incorporates life and death, eternal change, and continuity of nature. It profoundly connects with the myth of rebirth, renewal, and destruction. It shapes the lives of the characters of the novel. At one level, it can be interpreted as a symbol of unconsciousness. It represents both beauty and tragedy. It is in the river that Sophie Mol drowns, and it is also by the river that Ammu and Velutha's forbidden love blossoms, ultimately leading to their tragic end. Sophie Mol's drowning in this river starts a chain of constant change in the central characters' lives. It leads to the merciless killing of Velutha and the disintegration of Ammu's life. Thus, it speaks of the transient nature of happiness and the inevitable loss as an inseparable part of human existence. It also symbolizes the boundary between living beings and the dead. The river, as a mythic symbol, thus encapsulates the fluidity of identity and how memories are shaped by the myths we carry.

The incorporation of mythical symbols influences the setting and atmosphere of the novel. "Roy's interplay of Indian history, politics, social discrimination, forbidden love, and most importantly, Indian myths are deployed to achieve a meaningful discourse on the diabolical nature of the casteist culture" (Sayeed). The myth "The Small God" also serves a significant purpose in the novel. It stands for the marginalized, powerless, and voiceless beings. The untouchable Velutha, the Paravan carpenter, is portrayed with mythic qualities, as he embodies the essence of that small god pitted against Big gods of oppressive social structures. The "Small God" myth critiques social hierarchies, where those who challenge or fail to conform to the dominant power structure are crushed. He creates tiny things to entertain the children. So, the untouchable Velutha is the god of small things. He is loved and endeared by Ammu's twins, who are greedy for his father-like affection. Callous rules and destructive barriers of the caste system do not pollute their innocent minds. They endearingly identify with him as a social outcast. Lovelorn, betrayed, and jilted, Ammu finds herself drawn towards Velutha for emotional sustenance and physical love.

Roy's representations of Velutha transcend his social reality and allude to one of the most celebrated deities in Sanskrit mythology, the god Krishna. Like Jesus Christ, Krishna was cast as a personal saviour, a deity who took mortal form to redeem humankind from evil forces. The tragic and doomed love of Velutha and Ammu mirrors the sexual union of Krishna and Radha in the Gita Govinda, a blissful union, symbolic of the salvation of the human soul, the uniting of the human soul with the Divine (Rofail).

Velutha's tragic fate is similar to that of Icarus (a mythological figure), who dares to fly too near the Sun on the wings of wax made by the master craftsman Daedalus, here Ammu, and his communist party. He is oblivious that these wings are too fragile for such lofty flights because they will surely melt by the wrathful heat. He gets parched in this heat and ultimately perishes to be plunged into abysmal

depths. In obvious terms, the big gods of Ayemenem wield the merciless sceptre of coercion to punish the woman who has "defiled the generation of breeding" (Roy 258) and the hapless untouchable who dares to defy the conservative moral codes. Both these 'Mombattis' are meant to be crushed to the core because of an "unacknowledged fear – civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, the power's fear of powerlessness" (308).

In the novel, certain traces of mythical overtones of Paradise Lost. The "forbidden love" between an untouchable man and an upper-caste woman echoes the Biblical myth of the forbidden fruit. Their love defies the rigid moral codes of Ayemenem. Ayemenem is depicted as God's country, much like the Garden of Eden. Ammu's children Estha and Rahel are bereft of their innocence after discovering the secret love affair between Ammu and Velutha. They lose their paradise as they face the harsh realities of the adult world.

Several allusive, elusive, and suggestive shades in the novel echo the mythological hero Sisyphus' predicament and his eternal relationship with the rock. The fruitless struggle between Velutha and Ammu is very much like Sisyphus. These tragic transgressors also try hard to raise the huge stone of their existence, but this is rendered hellish. Like Sisyphus, they heave, puff, shove, and move this massive boulder inch by inch from base to the top. Then, just as the top comes in sight, the boulder slips from their grasp and rolls right back to the bottom. When they try to roll it back and push up to a station several times over, one sees their inner beings haunted by unguarded uncertainties and fears. And, at the end of their long effort and struggle (measured by skyless space and time without depth), the purpose of the scornful gods of Ayemenem is achieved. In God's own country (Kerala), as an inevitable punishment for their transgression, the potent weapon of coercion gets wielded mercilessly by the guardian gods of society and cultures, and they all end up reaching nowhere despite their constant efforts. They helplessly watch the heavy stone of their existence in a few moments towards the hell of torment which they will never know the end. In their vain and endless struggle to salvage something out of nothing, these doomed individuals share the fate of Sisyphus in one way or another as a result of pursuing their instincts. Their sin is the worst, a sin of the transgression of love laws, deeply seated in the psyche of a world of big gods. It subsequently materializes in their inescapable tragedy, shattering them altogether – "more sinned against than sinning" (Sharma 78).

The book exposes the myth of social stratification in progressive Christian communities, which has caused devastation to the low-caste Paravan Christians. Arundhati Roy presents a philosophical discourse that discusses the existential crisis, the issue of love laws, and the suppression of instinctive urges by ruthless and deterministic powers.

The novel's life is divided into two sets of forces, locked into a grim mortal fight. The upper world consists of the burden of history, the dead limbs of tradition, family culture and pride, patriarchy and political opportunism—the Gods of Big Things. The other layer comprises children, insecure women, untouchables, and working people with their struggle for identity and independence and natural urges and desires—the Gods of Small Things (Sharma 46-47).

Ammu's Mythic Journey: Analyze Ammu's character arc as a modern mythic journey, where her transgressions and desires challenge societal norms, leading to her downfall, much like tragic figures in ancient myths.

Amnu's life cycle also represents a modern mythic journey. It involves her love transgression and the challenging of social codes that lead to her subsequent downfall, much like the tragic figures in ancient myths. Ammu can be identified as an archetypal Sisyphean character if one sees her passion for life and enduring the eternity of hopeless struggle for happiness and stability. Whenever she is with Velutha on the bank of Meenachal, she becomes momentarily free from her toil and struggles in the patriarchal setup. Sisyphus is also briefly free from his labour as he heads down the mountain for the rock. Both are conscious of the absurdity of their fate, which offers no hope for reprieve. Hapless Velutha also epitomizes the archetype of Sisyphus. He is a doomed subaltern whose pathetic existence and terrible fate have a striking similarity to millions of marginalized beings. He is the god of small things, also referred to as the “God of Loss” – a symbol of sheer helplessness – someone or something pitted against the relentless and ruthless forces.

There is another Sisyphus in the form of Margaret Kochamma (Chacko’s ex-wife). She is a British lady who is driven by the instinct of independence. She forsakes her family to fulfil her choice. Soon, she gets under the yoke of Chacko and becomes dependent on him for mental and emotional sustenance. But this newfound equilibrium in marriage with Chacko proves transient as dissatisfaction and frustration take the better of their marriage. She gets fed up with this subordinated life that allows her no dreams of her own. She divorced Chacko and married Joe to stabilize her insecure life. Her propensity towards Joe for the betterment of her life in terms of material success and emotional fulfilment is summed up very strikingly by Roy through proper imagery: "Margaret Kochamma found herself drawn towards him like a plant in a dark room towards sedge of light." (Roy 148). But this second husband dies in an accident, and she is rendered alone. Then, she lays all the burden of her aspirations on her loving daughter Sophie Mol. Unfortunately, Sophie Mol dies in a boat accident while rowing in the river Meenachal at Ayemenem, and again, she finds herself destabilized – torn to pieces.

Thus, the novel symbolically incorporates certain myths to suggest the depths and dimensions of the inner and external struggle of the tragic transgressors. It helps in laying bare the unnoticed shades of dark realities. The marginalized in the novel are caught in an inescapable grip of their unavoidable fate. It gives us a new insight into chaotic factors that disrupt the flow of Ammu's and others' lives. Their lives are repeatedly broken into pieces. They collect the pieces and embrace the timeless journey from yesterday to tomorrow. They cherish the Sisyphean hope of making it to the top of the steep hill, but they are destined to be hurled back to the bottom. For their Sisyphus-like existence, both light and dark hold terrors. Their fragile world is in an inescapable octopus grip of the psychological suffocation, leaving no hope of resurrection.

So, *The God of Small Things* resonates with mythological overtones. This vital incorporation of myths is a powerful narrative device and a means of exploring and critiquing her characters' social, cultural, and psychological landscapes. It helps in illuminating the complexities of identity, memory, and power. It also provides a rich, symbolic framework for the reader to engage with the novel's deeper themes. These myths serve not merely as background references but as active components that shape the characters' lives and the narrative's thematic core. This is employed as a tool for cultural critique and character development and a way to deepen the novel's exploration of identity and memory.

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