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Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Glance on Style

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Abstract:

The paper aims at capturing the style of 1997 Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy's maiden novel The God of Small Things. Roy has used a variety of figurative devices in her work and inadvertently woven magic into the novel. It seems as if Roy is a painter and in her palette she has heaps and heaps of words to paint with in the canvas of her book. Arundhati's inadvertent ease with words – pouring like incessant rain in a hot June month tell a heart-rending tale – unleashes a new world for the reader – a world full of harsh, stark reality, bitter-sweet tragedies of human life and the irrevocable fatal consequences thereon. She has inserted in it shapes and patterns along with sound effects with much precision. The reader wallows in the abysmal depths of the book, completely forgetting the world outside. Reading it is like going through an actual experience. The novel is full of puzzles and paradoxes. Though the author does all the imagining for the reader, the latter remains on his toes throughout, fitting the different blocks of the plot-building into place.

Key words: *Metaphor, simile, oxymoron, anaphora, phanopoeia, melopoeia, omniscient narrator, stream of consciousness technique*

Style refers to the manner of writing of a literary work. Style studies is like capturing the 'personality' of the work of art – the study of the complex traits, conspicuous elements of a work – that go on to constitute its individuality. Style is the essence of the work, the very soul. The way the writer weaves magic through his narrative, the flavour he imparts to his work gives the structure and spirit to his work of art. The words, the rhythm, the speaker, the context – all contribute to the totality of this effect.

The present paper aims at a broad style study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Roy was the first Indian to win the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 for her maiden attempt at novel writing in *The God of Small Things*. Roy achieved overnight fame. According to Jason Cowley, one of the five Booker judges, "Roy's achievement...is never to forget about small things in life, the insects and flowers, wind and water, the outcaste and despised." He also says that Roy "fulfils the highest demand of the art of fiction: to see the world, not conventionally or habitually, but as if for the first time." (*India Today*, October 27, 1997, p.28). Roy was also awarded the Sydney Peace Prize in 2004 for her immense social work along with advocacy of non-violence. In 2006 she bagged the *Sahitya Akademi* award for collection of essays, "The Algebra of Infinite Justice", but declined to accept it.

Let us begin with the opening of the novel. The novel begins with an elaborate description of Ayemenem, the sleepy town of Kerala where much of the novel is set. Arundhati uses prose that is poetic and imaginative in nature:

"May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes." (Roy, Arundhati, 1997, p.1)

As is evident from the passage, Roy gives a beautiful account of the landscape of Ayemenem during the month of May. The reader suddenly enters a new world and the colourful images created by the novelist subsequently make him oblivious of his own surroundings. The prose is melopoeic. The reader simply gets carried away by the 'audible' images created by the author. As a veteran novelist sows the seeds of the novel in the introductory chapter, so does Roy throw subdued hints regarding the events to follow. Later in the chapter when she describes the monsoon landscape she talks of boundaries blurring owing to overgrowth of vegetation – here she gives us a clue regarding an important theme of novel that runs throughout – the theme of *blurring boundaries* vis-à-vis caste, race, sex and so on. The major characters are introduced and the theme is touched upon:

"In a purely practical sense it would probably be correct to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem. Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house – the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture – must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for." (Roy, 1997, p.32)

The plot of the novel has a non-linear narrative and shifting back and forth, it seems to be encrypted till the end. There is a considerable shift in the chronology of the narrative. The novel begins with future and ends with past. In the beginning Rahel comes to her maternal uncle's place in Ayemenem after twenty three years. Estha is also *re-returned* to his maternal uncle. Both Estha and Rahel relive what they went through in childhood. Much of the story has been unfolded from the point of view of Rahel along with her dizygotic twin Estha. The two twins are emotionally entwined. They seem to be one mind separated by two bodies:

"Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separated, but with joint identities."....."Now, these years later, Rahel has a memory of waking up one night giggling at Estha's funny dream."....."She has other memories too that she has no right to have."(Roy, 1997, p.2)

Such sections of the novel are really worth reading. You can actually empathise with the flowing emotions of the two children. In fact Roy gives word, phrase or sentence equivalents of what the twins go through at a given time. The reader marvels at the very thought of the 'octopus' inside Estha or the 'cold moth in Rahel's heart. Roy's acumen into the working of a child's mind is remarkable. A notable fact is that Roy has devoted some sections of the novel completely to the fears, frustrations and secret passions of Ammu. Her deprivations in life, a broken marriage, the void and vacuum created therein have been sensitively dealt with. However the point of view shifts to other characters as well. However the readers get an inkling of the omniscient narrator who pervades the novel and keeps peeping at the reader off and on. The story revolves around the visit of Sophie Mol, the daughter of Chacko, the maternal uncle of the twins. The sudden, accidental death of Sophie Mol changes the course of the lives of the twins for all times to come. The untimely family tragedy triggers a chain of events that leads to much bitterness in the family and the poignant separation of the twins for several years. The theme(s) chosen by Arundhati are the same old conventional ones: serrated relationships, love, betrayal, the wonderful world of children, men v/s women, the sad plight of untouchables and outcasts:

"Perhaps, Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors, But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly.

It was a time when uncles became fathers, mothers lovers, and cousins died and had funerals.

It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened."(Roy, 1997, p.31)

Roy has picked up strands of reality and juxtaposed them together. In a way here themes are universal. Her uniqueness lies in the way she plays with space and time and renders an oblique kind of representation of her memories. The novel definitely has autobiographical overtones. Roy is undoubtedly Rahel, one of the twins. Ammu is Mary Roy, Arundhati's mother who married a Bengali man. Arundhati herself admits that while the texture of the book is autobiographical, the incidents are not. She has focused over minute details giving elaborate description. She is at her best when she deals with the fluidity of children's thoughts. In the secret world of children there are dark, secret, mysterious places. We also find locked windows and swollen cupboards. The thought-process of children is quite peculiar:

"The baby bat flew up into the sky and turned into a jet plane without a crisscrossed trail."(Roy, 1997, p.6)

"Margaret Kochamma told her to Stoppit.

So she Stoppited." (Roy, 1997, p.141)

The memories of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man haunted Estha throughout. Rahel being his other half knew all about it:

"The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man could walk in any minute. Catch a Cochin-Kottayam bus and be there. And Ammu would offer him a cup of tea. Or pineapple squash perhaps. With ice. Yellow in a glass.

With the long iron stirrer. Estha stirred the thick, fresh jam.

The dying froth made dying frothly shapes.

A crow with a crushed wing.

A clenched chicken's claw.

A Nowl (not Ousa) mired in sickly jam.

A sadly swirl.

And nobody to help." (Roy, 1997, p.194)

The ethos of Kerala in 1960s has been brilliantly captured and adroitly woven into the narrative of the novel. Roy has dealt with various social issues of the era intermingling with the conservative, closed, cloistered life of Syrian Christians viz. Communism, Casteism etc. The strength of Roy lies in her pictographic style of writing: the haphazardly layered, circuitous narrative, the audio-visual images concurrently created by deftly chosen words are a virtual delight for the literary palate.

Roy's style of construction, presentation, especially unravelling of the plot holds the interest of the reader. It is like a curious word-labyrinth, continuously motivating the reader to search his way out to the end of the book. Segments of sounds stitch together life's secrets; words bubble up to the brim creating sound and visual imagery. Chapter 1 is titled "Paradise Pickles & Preserves" which is an example of alliteration. There are a lot many other examples of assonance as well as consonance throughout the novel:

"Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bottom...Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appears in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways."(Roy, 1997, p.1)

“She remembers the taste of tomato sandwiches – *Estha’s* sandwiches, that *Estha* etc – on the Madras Mail to Madras.” (Roy, 1997, p.3)

“dark blood spilling from his skull like a secret.” (Roy, 1997, p.6)

“a rushing, rolling, fishswimming sense.” (Roy, 1997, p.30)

“Rain. Rushing, inky water. And a smell. Sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze.” (Roy, 1997, p.32)

Throughout the novel we find onomatopoeic words – typical compound words coined by the author to impart a certain effect to the narrative. Words like *furrywhirring*, *sariflapping*, *dullthudding* etc lend sound to the narrative. Frequently rhyming words and phrases run throughout the novel like lexical leitmotifs, binding its lopsided narrative with subtle strands.

“Not old.

Not young.

But a viable die-able age”. (Roy, 1997, p.3)

“Satin-lined.

“Brass handle shined.” (Roy, 1997, p.4)

“The time was ten to two. (Roy, 1997, p.123)

Pappachi’s moth, *History House* and *Heart of darkness* etc. are the various symbols used in the novel. Roy has taken liberty with her choice of words in the novel. She has made abundant use of compound words and quaint phrases: “Love-in-Tokyo” (Roy, 1997, p.37), “Made-in-England go-go bag” (Roy, 1997, p.4), “Orangedrink Lemondrink Man” (Roy, 1997, p.10), “re-returned” (Roy, 1997, p.13), “impossible-to-forget toys” (Roy, 1997, p.91), “longago” (Roy, 1997, p.97), “pigeon-toed” (Roy, 1997, p.95), “Lay Ter” (Roy, 1997, p.146) and the list is endless. Roy uses nouns and adjectives almost always used in combination, as a single word e.g. ‘dustgreen’, ‘dullthudding’, ‘greenmossing’, ‘mossgreen’, ‘coaldust’, ‘fishswimming’ etc. This technique leads to a forced visualization of the scene. Similarly you can smell the ‘sicksweet’ roses and experience the ‘sourmetal’ smell of bus rails. Here you are transported inside a bus and you can smell the steel of the rails; you can experience the perspirated odours. ‘Dullthudding’ reminds you of something falling in mud, ‘fishswimming’ takes us floating in the blue of an ocean.

Since Arundhati Roy deals with long descriptions of nature, she uses personification very often. Meenachal river in Ayemenem is often personified. When Rahel comes back to Ayemenem after a gap of twenty three years, the river becomes the symbol of her ghastly memories associated with the tragedy that took place in childhood:

Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed.

Both things had happened.

It had shrunk. And she had grown.” (Roy, 1997, p.124)

Roy also makes use of oxymorons in the novel for example ‘Sicksweet’, ‘dirty blessing’ etc.

There are innumerable metaphors and similes in the novel. The title of the novel is metaphorical. Velutha the untouchable is the God of Loss and the God of Small Things. Small insignificant things bring about big changes in life: “Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued With a new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story.” (Roy, 1997, p.33)

“There are big dreams and little ones.’ Big Man the Laltain sahib, Small Man the Mombatti,’ an old Bihari coolie, who met Estha’s school excursion party at the railway station (unfailingly year after year) used to say of dreams.” (Roy, 1997, p.89)

“Heaven opened and the water hammered down, reviving the reluctant old well, greenmossing the pigless pigsty, carpet bombing still, tea-coloured puddles the way memory bombs still tea-coloured minds.” (Roy, 1997, p.10)

As the story is narrated from the point of view of children, Roy has provided the readers with striking parallelisms descriptions and panoramic details. There are uncountable similes in the novel as the thought process of children is typical – they tend to liken and compare things in their own way. Let us consider some examples:

“Strange objects appeared like ideas in the evenings and burned themselves on Baby Kochamma’s dim 40-watt bulbs.” (Roy, 1997, p.10)

“Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge.” (Roy, 1997, p.18)

“Her (Baby Kochamma’s) eyes spread like butter behind her thick glasses.” (Roy, 1997, p.20)

“The sound of a thousand voices spread over the frozen traffic like a Noise Umbrella.” (Roy, 1997, p.65)

“A *sourmetal* smell, like steel bus-rails...” (Roy, 1997, p.72)

“The silence gathered its skirts and slid, like Spiderwoman, up the slippery bathroom wall.” (Roy, 1997, p.93)

Roy has made ample use of capital letters to depict the importance children give to little things. We also find elliptical sentences at a lot of places. There is a deliberate *sprinkling of italics* at many places. Then we also find the use of anaphora:

“But Estha couldn’t help it. He got up to go. Past angry Ammu. Past Rahel concentrating through her knees. Past Baby Kochamma. Past the Audience that had to move its legs again. Thiswayandthat. The red sign over the door said EXIT in a red light. Estha EXITED.” (Roy, 1997, p.101)

“The History House.

Whose doors were locked and windows open.

With cold stone floors and billowing, ship-shaped shadows on the walls.

Where waxy ancestors with tough toe-nails and breath that smelled of yellow maps whispered papery whispers.

Where translucent lizards lived behind old paintings.

Where dreams were captured and re-dreamed.

Where an old Englishman ghost, sickled to a tree, was abrogated by a pair of two-egg twins--“(Roy, 1997, p.306)

It is however not possible to list all the examples. Roy has made excessive use of non-finite verbs.

“his aching eyes glittering like glass, his burning cheek against the bare skin of Ammu’s trembling, hymnbook-holding arm.”(Roy, 1997, p.5)

“Someone watching. Looking out of the window at the sea.”(Roy, 1997, p.19)

“The pickling (and the squashing, the slicing, boiling and stirring, the grating, salting, drying, the weighing and bottle sealing) stopped.”(Roy, 1997, p.171)

The “echoing stationsounds” of the railway station – “hostling-jostling crowd scurrying hurrying buying selling luggage trundling...bargaining reservation checking.”(Roy, 1997, p.300)-- startle the reader.

Yet another novel device used by Roy is phanopoeia which is a figurative or verbal device by which the writer conveys the image of the object to the visual imagination.

“Automobile islands in a river of people.”(Roy, 1997, p.65)

“A gossamer blanket of coaldust floated down like a dirty blessing and gently smothered the traffic.”(Roy, 1997, p.86)

A cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts landed lightly on Rahel’s heart. Where its icy legs touched her, she got goosebumps. Six goosebumps on a careless heart.”(Roy, 1997, p.112)

“The moth on Rahel’s heart spread its velvet wings, and the chill crept into her bones.”(Roy, 1997, p.113)

“It was warm, the water, Greygreen. Like rippled silk.

With fish in it.

With the sky and trees in it.

And at night, the broken yellow moon in it.”(Roy, 1997, p.123)

“It was a beautiful house.

White-walled once. Red-roofed. But painted in weather-colours now. With brushes dipped in nature’s palette. Mossgreen. Earthbrown. Crumbleblack. Making it look older than it really was. Like sunken treasure dredged up from the ocean bed. Whale-kissed and barnacled. Swaddled in silence. Breathing bubbles through its broken windows.”(Roy, 1997, p.306-7)

Roy has taken full liberty as far as the syntax of the novel is concerned. Since Roy narrates through stream of consciousness technique, sometimes a single word may replace the thought-process of a whole sentence. At times thoughts are expressed through a couple of noun-phrases or noun-clauses grouped together:

The slow ceiling fan. The sun behind the curtains.

The yellow wasp wasping against the windowpane in a dangerous dzzzz.

A disbelieving lizard’s blink.

High-stepping chickens in the yard.

The sound of the sun crinkling the washing. Crisping white bedsheets. Stiffening starched saris. Off-white and gold.”(Roy, 1997, p.201)

The novel leans on the hush-hush realities of life – the facts that are supposed to be hidden in closets, in our minds, forbidden to be uttered. The novel provides the readers a rare insight into human relationships esp. child psychology. Roy reveals a *child’s vision of the adult world*. Never before has an author touched the minds of the readers so deeply through the delicate thoughts of children – their deviated, mazed, defiant perspective owing to their meagre experience of life, their lack of worldly wisdom etc. The world of children is secret and strange, fanciful and fantastical, replete with childish aphorisms. As serious a thing as a funeral is taken in a totally different way by a child. The mechanical repetition of the priests’ words gives us a new insight.

“ Inside the earth Sophie Mol screamed, and shredded satin with her teeth. But you can’t hear screams through earth and stone.

Sophie Mol died because she couldn’t breathe.

Her funeral killed her. *Dus to dus to dus to dus to dus*. On her tombstone it said *A Sunbeam Lent To Us Too Briefly*.

Ammu explained later that Too Briefly meant For Too Short a While”.(Roy, 1997, p.7)

“Two-egg Twin Ambassadors. Their Excellencies Ambassador E(lvis). Pelvis, and Ambassador S(tick).Insect.”(Roy, 1997, p.139)

“When Ammu was really angry, she said Jolly Well. Jolly Well was a deeply well with larfing dead people in it.”(Roy, 1997, p.148)

Roy is extremely sensitive to the distorted world of children – how they perceive the behaviour of adults towards them:

“ ‘Is. That. Clear ?’ Ammu said again.

Frightened eyes and a fountain looked back at Ammu.

Sleepy eyes and a surprised puff looked back at Ammu.

Two heads nodded three times.”

Yes. It's Clear."(Roy, 1997, p.148-149)

Roy's clarity of vision is par excellence. She captures the slices of life as a cameraperson. The novel comes with its audiovisual effects. Infact Roy has introduced her architectonics into the novel. She has handled words deftly as if she were a veteran craftsperson. In an Interview she said,

"I never believed that there was any sort of direct link between studying architecture and building buildings. So far as I am concerned, I still practice architecture. Constructing my book was actually an architectural thing."

(*First City*, Delhi City Magazine, June 1997, p.25)

Roy's characterisation is extremely memorable if not very profound. We cannot afford to forget the self-effacing Estha, the deeply observing Rahel, Ammu with "the reckless rage of a suicide bomber", the oppressive Baby Kochamma, the unfortunate *Paravan* Velutha or even the innocent little Sophie Mol. The ending of the novel is thought-provoking. It is open to individual interpretation by the readers. The novel ends on a bright note – the word "Tomorrow". But the *chronological ending of the novel has dark overtones*. Some people find the incest scene at the end superfluous. Others find her description of Kerala terribly lacking in spirit. Still others denigrated her on the basis of excessive use of similes and taking too much liberty with punctuation. In my opinion she is unbeatable. Writing such a novel as one's maiden attempt is really commendable. Roy's only fault is that she is a blatant realist and has the audacity to pen the forbidden. The twins complete full circle. Afterall, "they had known eachother before life began."(Roy, 1997, p.327) It also alludes to the symbolic reunion of Ammu and Velutha:

"Anything is possible in Human Nature.....Love. Madness. Hope. Infinite Joy.(Roy, 1997, p.118)

It seems as if Roy is a painter and in her palette she has heaps and heaps of words to paint with in the canvas of her book. Roy's 'bookcraft' is totally planned and calculated. Arundhati's inadvertent ease with words – pouring like incessant rain in a hot June month tell a heart-rending tale – unleashes a new world for the reader – a world full of harsh, stark reality, bitter-sweet tragedies of human life and the irrevocable fatal consequences thereon. She has inserted in it shapes and patterns along with sound effects with much precision. The reader wallows in the abysmal depths of the book, completely forgetting the world outside. Reading it is like going through an actual experience. The novel is full of puzzles and paradoxes. Though the author does all the imagining for the reader, the latter remains on his toes throughout, fitting the different blocks of the plot-building into place. The book is highly stylized – in other words it is a linguist's delight.

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