

## Reading Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things': A Stylistic Approach to Birth Cultural Meanings

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**Abstract:** *Arundhati Roy the booker prize nominee of 1997, from India reaffirms once again the position of Indian English as one of the accepted literatures of the world and also secures its place. The text doubly reinforces Meenakshi Mukherjee's "anxiety of Indianness" and confirms to the world the importance of languages other than English and how writers extrapolate indigenous language (here Malayalam) into English consciously to invoke the interest in Malayalam language and preserve the language amidst a tight rope walk in the global scenario. My intention in this paper is to draw the significance of the play of Malayalam words and meaning signification whereby easily the translated English language could have been used. For this I have explored the lexical and syntactic devices and other stylistics employed to create the artistic exuberance in a culturally different text like The God of Small Things.*

**Keywords:** *Play, Malayalam, words, culturally, different, meaning signification, anxiety of Indianness, lexical devices, syntactic devices.*

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It is a consensus among critics and writers alike that texts acquire meaning with the readers and the culture in which it is disseminated, contextualized and dispersed. To make it clearer, texts open up meanings through various devices like language play, narrative strategies, word art etc. that helps an uninformed reader to situate the culture to an extent. Thus the text becomes a coded language fully woven with intricate mazes and paths, hiding levels of meaning. The bilingual writer is double edged because of two reasons, firstly the mother tongue influence and secondly the second language knowledge. This in turn complicates the issue of translating cultures in a second language literature which is both alien and foreign because of the lack of words in the second language. A writer at this juncture realizes the untranslatability of culture which Meenakshi Mukherjee calls as "the anxiety of Indianness" and explores this through language experimentation and other stylistics. One of the ways is to combine native and foreign language, carving an altogether new language which is best understandable culturally. 'Manglish', is one such realization - an existing language fusion widely spoken by an average educated Malayali. It might be possible that this emerging language though not very well accepted and received by academicians, might have influenced the writer to explore with stylistic devices and new coinages in written form similar to the spoken form- which can situate the story and its implied meanings. This is fully realized and represented by her debut novel *God of Small Things*. Being born into a time of feudalistic communism and the shifting scenario of Anglicanisation of education system, Roy never misses the confused Malayali consciousness that still has a native language and a new language that was forced upon for official purposes. It is also interesting to note that, this cultural shift also gets reflected in various other areas of life, for example the lifestyle, education and an introduction to a 'glocal' world.

To draw from Ferdinand de Saussure's terminology meaning signification observes a certain tracing from signifier to signified in a continuous chain which he borrows from Derrida - "deferring" and "differing" called *differance*. Roy employs this technique when she uses indigenous words in English. This has allowed her the space to incorporate the cultural load with all its nuances easily without much effort. The story itself is narrated from the point of view of the child (Rahel mol) so the text is full of various new words which are appropriate for the child narrator. Sometimes words are read in the reverse order which is all part of child's play. Another interesting thing to be noted is the language spoken by each of the individual characters. Margaret Kochamma, the symbol of the foreigner who falls in love with the native, speaks in English and is purely a British middle-class woman with her culture rooted in her. While Chacko, the stereotype of the educated upper class Indian who is again the epitome of the real scientist speaks in a language quite alien to his own yet one which he knows

well enough along with eccentrics of the typical scientist. Baby Kochamma on the other hand again being the grand aunt of the family brought up in Aymennem and for around twenty years in a Roman Catholic convent uses a language which is quite modern due to exposure to the BBC and almost all the fights of the wrestlers from Hulk Hogan onwards on the television which is again a new turn of the century. There are various other characters like Ammu, the rebellious and the disgraceful one of the family, Esthappen her son who is often the silent one that blends into the chaos of the family and getting little attention as a young man, then there are characters like Kochu Maria, the servant of the family yet she is the touchable Christian, then Comrade Pillai, the workers, Velutha and Velappapen. The language of the touchable and untouchables is quite different, there is also a difference when it comes to the ranking within the Syrian Christian Community so the language used can be seen as a powerful tool through which the battle of each of the characters is wielded.

The whole unfortunate story has been retold by the narrator with Rahel's return to Ayemenem, the story of the two egged dizygotic identifiable twins and how they got separated for a long time with the event of Sophie mol's death an unlucky mishap for which the twins have to bear the guilt of murder for life long. All the other events are added to this main plot and the final coming together of the two twins who are two individuals but in a single soul, who had no distinction between "who is who and which is which"(2). The other events like the rise of communism in Kerala, the love of Velutha and Ammu, the tragic love story of Margaret Kochamma, the abandoned forlorn love of Baby Kochamma, the disastrous marriage life of Ammu and her husband all interwoven in the web of the sad tales that lurked the Ayemenem house forever. Though the story itself is a sad one the narrative technique employed by Roy is one which stands out. The story is unravelled like a building with many chambers along with the language it is unfolded and so is often called Roy's "architectonic style of writing". A close study of the text helps to detect the language patterns present in the text, of individual words and imagery and where it occurs is often crucial. It is therefore important that the words the novelist uses must therefore be appreciated against a background of other language choices not made. It can be said that the most striking feature of the text is the linguistic innovation the novelist makes. Surendran's claims suits the context that the language used by the writer indicates the patterns of thought and idea in a work of fiction (151). Roy's markedly different style of writing comes from the usage of a poetic style which makes her unique amongst other novelists.

To better understand Roy's style of writing one has to undergo many levels of reading new coinages, Malayalam words, reverse reading etc. just as a sari woven carefully in silk with its stylistic devices. John Updike quotes Roy's style as one which "underlines the eccentricity of the language in relation to tales emotional centre". This is backed up by Roy herself when she says "my language is a skin of my thoughts." This may be one of the reasons for a lot of code language suffused with cross references in her text. In exploring the *God of Small Things*, one comes across the usage of words, phrases and even sentences from the vernacular language, use of italics, and upper case letters, subject less sentences, faulty spellings, topicalization, deviation from normal word order, single word sentences, change of classes, clustering of word classes, monograms, macaroni, puns, acrostics, palindromes, portmanteau and other modes of word play. One of the most noticeable devices is the lexicon and grammar. So having acquainted with the style of the text with its brilliant innovations, the details of how these techniques become compelling for the writer to use and why in this globalized world where English has become almost a connecting link, is there a need to still hold onto Malayalam words, usages, songs and memories of native language amidst the current scenario? Is it a mere marketing strategy? Or does the text extrapolate the boundaries of language and make it available to the globalized world? The text also questions whether it is the same anxiety, "the anxiety of Indianness" as expressed by Raja Rao in his preface to *Kanthapura* and also suggested by Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay of the same title.

For this the text is explored of its stylistic devices and other literary devices of innovation. The most important device explored is the repetition of phrases and words. This has helped in creating the chanting effect just like we observe in children. So such a mechanism aptly goes with this text as the text is told from a child's point of view.

Not old, not young.

Small, small things.

Orange drink, lemon drink man.

History's smell, like old roses in a breeze.

Things change in a day.

The God of Loss.

The God of Small Things.

A brown leaf on a black back.

He left no ripples in water, no footprints on the shore.

Another of the writer's favourites is the use of similes. Simile is the figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another of a different kind used to make a description more emphatic or vivid.

Edges, borders, boundaries, brinks and limits have appeared like a team of trolls on thin separate horizons (3)

Her face was pale and wrinkled as a dhobi's thumb from being in water for too long.(4)

Still birds slid by on moving wires like unclaimed baggage at the airport (8)

History's smell. Like old roses on a breeze. (55)

Sometimes her words are used from a denotational point of view and sometimes it is evocative and connotational all at once. Roy's language has been noted for its ingenious combination of irreverence, humour and irony, which produce startling effect so that her style appears arresting (Vinoda 55).

There were so many stains on the road.

Squashed Miss Mitten-shaped stains in the Universe.

Squashed frog-shaped stains in the Universe.

Squashed crows that had tried to eat the squashed frog-shaped stains in the Universe.

Squashed dogs that ate the squashed crow-shaped stains in the Universe.

Feathers. Mangoes. Spit.

All the way to Cochin (82)

The language is like a hypnotic chanting which invokes the kind of aura when one prays. The same repetitive mode continues for almost throughout the text. When Ammu observes Velutha in the river then she felt that world he stood is his: "That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars." (333-334).

The text abounds in repetition and the following lines are yet another example for the same.

The scurrying, hurrying, boat world was already gone.

The White termites on their way to work.

The White ladybirds on their way home.

The White beetles burrowing away from the light

The White grasshoppers with whitewood violins.

The sad white music (336).

Sometimes the words are repeated for some kind of effect. For example the word past is repeated a lot of times to bring some kind of effect. In most cases a given language is reproduced not in the same sentence and with every new repetition it becomes a certain variation of the theme created by its first occurrence.

Past floating yellow limes in brine that needed prodding from time to time...

Past shelves of pectin and preservatives.

Past trays of bitter gourd, with knives and coloured finger-guards.

Past gunny bags bulging with garlic and small onions...

Past the label cupboard full of labels... (193-194)

For instance, Rahel is able to identify Velutha because of his birthmark on his bare back: A brown leaf on a black back. For Ammu, Velutha is 'The God of Small Things'. So, there are repeated references of Velutha as "A cheerful one arm man"; "The God of Loss"; "The God of Goose Bumps and sudden smiles"; and that "He left no ripples in the water, no footprints in the sand, no image in the mirror". The greatest frequency of repetition is reserved for echoing ideas, especially those which are considered as important in the major themes of the novel like "Twin children"; "The Loss of Sophie Mol"; "The smell of old roses on a breeze"; "The God of Small Things"; "The Love Laws", and "No Locusts Stand I".

When she talks about childhood experiences, the language is emotive and suffused with feelings. Even the style becomes highly experimental both at the lexical and syntactic level. But when she speaks from an adult perspective, one notices a change in style. The language used in this passage clearly illustrates it:

The twins were too young to know that these were only history's henchmen. Sent to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke its laws.

Impelled by feelings that was primal yet paradoxically wholly impersonal.

Feelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear-civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness.

Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify.

Men's Needs.

What Esthappen and Rahel witnessed that morning, though they didn't know it then, was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions (this was not war after all, or genocide) of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy.

Structure. Order. Complete monopoly.

It was human history, masquerading as God's Purpose, revealing herself to an under-age audience.

There was nothing accidental about what happened that morning. Nothing incidental.

It was no stray mugging or personal settling of scores.

This was an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it.

History in live performance (308-309)

Her lexical style indicates her fondness for compound words, which is an important feature in the novel 'dust green', 'wet green' and 'moss green'. She also forms new compound words "car breeze", "day moon", "sleep smile", "blue grey blue", "shark smile", "slip peroily", "Chacko-the comrade", "clear-as-glass kiss", "bottomless-bottom ful feeling", "God-knows-what", "Love-in -Tokyo", "part-time - happiness", "getting-outedness"; "afternoon gnap"; "well-squelch"; "green-for-the day" and "dinner-plate-eyed and also a lot of neologisms "sick sweet" (adjective +adjective), "dust green" (noun + adjective), "dirt coloured" (noun + past participle) and "fever button" (noun +noun).

There are words that are quite new like: "furry whirring", "sari flapping", "die able", "touchable" (as apposite to 'untouchable'), "mid-poem". Some other coinages include: "gnap", "Bar Nowl", "Locusts Stand I", "antly", "Lay Ter". Almost all the words have special meaning in the text, like "sour metal" smell. The handcuffs carried by policemen have this smell; this arises out of an iron object being touched quite often by the sweaty hands of men. Other examples include: "viable-dieable age", and "police cup of tea".

Roy also makes striking use of conversations formed out of single words, phrases or clauses, like: "Ammu's trying-not-to-cry mouth...", "What is it", "this way and that", "Orange drink Lemon drink Man", "Ice cream Rose milk", "Coco-Cola Fanta", "fever button", "a disbelieving lizard's blink", "high-stepping chickens in the yard", "the sound of sun crinkling the washing", "crisping white bed sheets" and "stiffening sarees.

It is a common understanding that children like onomatopoeic words so Roy aptly applies them to her text to bring that effect. She also employs a lot of Indian words which are exact translations. 'Little Blessed One' for PunnyanKunju, 'Little Ammu' for Ammukutty, "Chi-chi-pooch" for Shit-wiper. (120)

The novelist uses full stops to highlight the adjectives as in: "Wild. Sick. Sad" (159) and "Steady. Solvent. Thin." (248) The reversing of word classes is another stylistic exploration of Roy "alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning" (180) "One Loved a Little Less" (186). Sometimes she uses words in such a way that they join together to sound as in the following "what is your name" (127), "okay then" (30) "blue grey blue eyes" (147), "carsmile" (153), "deadly purpose" (304), and "long ago" (263). Sometimes the words are read in reverse order as in "welcome to the Spice Coast of India" becomes emoclew ot eht ecips tsaoc foaidni (139); "The red sign on the red and white arm said STOP in white. "POTS", Rahel said 'Big Man the Laltain and Small Man the Mombatti', where Laltain stands for 'lantern' and 'Mombatti' stands for candle etc.

Another interesting part is her abundant use of indigenous words (Malayalam words) as a means of stylistic devices. These words can be categorised as titles or names given to people. *Mammachi*, *kochamma*, *ammaven*, *chetan*, *cheduthi*, *appoi*, *ammai*, *chachen* etc. In a Malayali context these names have a very important role. These refer to the family relationships and the distance in terms of a typical South Indian Syrian Christian culture. The first one, *mammachi* is from the maternal side - great aunt, *kochamma* is mother's sister, *ammaven* again is mother's brother or uncle, *chetan* again goes to an elder brother from a high and respectable family (social and economic baggage), *cheduthi* is again sister in law from a high class family, *appoi* means father's brother, *ammai* is father's sister, *chachen* is a typical Syrian Christian title for mother's brother. So Roy's intention in using a local name and title was to bring out the cultural context along with its stratification very clearly. Another interesting thing to note is that by making the cultural relationships clear Roy makes a stand to show how these relationships clearly works, along with the biases unlike a Western context. In a typical patriarchal Malayali household even family relationships have their own scaling. Often the paternal side outweighs or is considered more important than a maternal one. Roy in a way here is questioning such biases too through the revolting Ammu. This mainly untangles the cultural code without which the reader finds it difficult to understand. Nevertheless she has used the technique of explaining some of the words in brackets:

"*Ruchilokathinterajavu*" (Emperors of the Realm of Taste), while others are left open for the readers to determine. The next category of grouping is addition of a noun to noun:

Mary kutty, Molly kutty, Lucy kutty, Kochu Maria, Esthamon, Esthamol, Ammu kutty. (noun + noun)

Another interesting categorization is on the basis of food consumed in Kerala:

Parippuvada, kappa and meenvevichathu, kodampuli, illumbi, perakka, kanji and meen, avaloseondas, olassa, paratha, chakkavelaichathu, iddiappam, and avial.

When it comes to clothing too Roy uses the Malayalam words like the tradition "chatta" and "mundu" for women, "mundu" for men.

Roy also uses some old Malayalam rhymes recited to children:

*Koo-kookookumtheevandi*

*Kookipaadumtheevandi*

*Rapakalodumtheevandi*

*Thalannunikumtheevandi.*

Yet another Malayalam song popularly called "*vanchipattu*" is again recited once the children are in the boat.

*Thaiythakkathaiythaiythome...*

*Thaiyomethithometharaka, thithometheem.* (196)

Another song which the children sing is:

*Enda da korangacha,*

*Chandiithrathenjadu*

*Padiyilthooranpoyapol*

*Nerrakkanuthirineranginjan.*(196)

Another group of words used are (Adjective +Noun):

ModaliMary kutty, Comrade Chacko, Kari Sahib.

She has used various expressions also like:

*Ower* (yes), *Aiyyo* ( an expression of anxiety), *edacherukka* (hey! boy), *Orkunniley* (don't you remember?), *Aiyyopavam* (poor man!), *edi penne* (hey girl), *kushumbi* (jealous girl), *valarey* (very much), *akara* (shore), *chenda* (drum), *Aiyyokashtam* (poor thing), *entha* (what), *madiyo* (enough), *valya* (big), *kochu* (small), *mittam* (courtyard), *vannu* (came), *naaley* (tomorrow).

Roy's lexical style, incidentally, also includes a lot of un translated Malayalam words that are repeated and fore grounded throughout the text. This certainly roots the novel in its context as it releases an interface network of metonymic referentiality, causing interpretation despite it being unintelligible to non-Malayali readers.

Again the compulsion for the usage of Malayalam word "*naaley*" so many times in the novel has to be justified. This word has special significance which holds the memories of the present with the past and the future. Similarly the use of this word instead of the English translation "tomorrow" at least for some readers seems inapt. But Roy purposefully uses the word to bring more effect of emphasis. However if the reader observe the trend of the Malayali community, her usage of mixing Malayalam words and direct translation of words into English is nothing new. Malayali community as a whole has accepted this fact and they do use English mixed with Malayalam which is generally called "Manglish" (English + Malayalam) by them. Might be Roy was bringing out to the world this trend to gain a legal acceptance of the same. Though the acceptance of this style by the writers and the critics is a much debatable topic, for there will always be people who accept it and who disagree such changes in language.

Language is a fluid entity, it can always flow and mix with others and then only can it stand the test of times. Roy might be advocating for such changes and could have employed this device to bring some insight to the world around. But in some cases the Malayalam word is used to situate the cultural context. The use of the word "*mittam*" the translation of this word into English means yard. However the word has a lot of cultural significance in a Malayali household. Every prominent household would have a *mittam* that has a small place to worship according to the Hindu custom. It is then considered an important part of the house which brings forth "*aishwaryam*". Thus a culturally different text like *The God of Small Things* opens up spaces for the interpretation of the readers even through the play of words especially indigenous language by invoking an interest and also from the textual cues left in by the writer. For example the writer mostly leaves a contextual understanding by giving various clues like when the writer says that Kochu Maria wears a "chatta" and "mundu". Being a wordsmith and an architect by her profession Roy has woven a narrative embedded with various stylistic devices both syntactic and lexical that makes her work an artistic work that stands out. Though a culturally different text the readers are easily able to locate and engage with the text very well.

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