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Looking Into The Multicultural Aspects Of India Through The Lens Of Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*

Dr. Priyanka Jaiswal

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Government Degree College, Duddhi, Sonbhadra,

Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract: Culture plays a pivotal role in the development of any country, and the culture of a nation represents its values, goals, practices and shared beliefs. For a country like India, which is always known for its cultural diversity, it has been totally a precious and valuable thing from ages. Since times immemorial, India has always been famous for its cultural diversity because, in India, languages, beliefs, religions, customs and traditional values differ from place to place and from people to people. Followers of different religions like Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and Buddhist etc. all share the same space, but the members of each of these different religions and cultures share a common identity of being Indian. All of them respect each other's religion without interfering into others values, traditions and customs because they all believe in the notion of *Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam*. Therefore, 'Unity in Diversity', these are not mere words but something that are highly applicable to a country like India, which is incredibly rich in cultural values. Everything from cultures and values to customs and traditions are special in this Land of Gods and that is the uniqueness of Indian culture. In this connection, the present paper is a study of Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winner *The God of Small Things*, which commendably highlights the multicultural aspects of India.

Keywords: Society, Culture, Multiculturalism, Hybridity, Chutnification

The word culture is very unique within itself which embodies the whole aspect of a society. The study of the culture of any society is a study of the whole system because it is the language, knowledge, laws, beliefs, customs and traditions that give a society its distinctive features and characteristics. If a land is devoid of its cultural inheritance, where there are no values, laws, beliefs, customs, traditions and language, then what would it be called – a Society? And the answer is 'No', because without cultural values the existence of a society is unimaginable. So it can be said that the culture is the soul of any society, or, in a more metaphoric words, the culture of a society is like the water to a fish or the oxygen we breathe. It is a powerful social tool which governs the lives and controls the behavior of its subject. And the culture one belongs to have a dominant role in how he/she interacts or behaves with others.

Indian writers, from time to time, have tried to represent the richness of Indian culture through their works whether consciously or unconsciously, and Arundhati Roy is no exception in this. Her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) is replete with the multicultural aspects and represents a realistic picture of Indian society as well. It deals with the cultures of ancient India and the post-modern or post-colonial India both.

The novel is basically set in the village of Ayemenem of Kottayam district in Kerala, where people from different religions and cultures co-exist. The novel deals with the story of a Syrian Christian family and the origin of the Syrian Christians is itself very interesting. As the novel tells, the Syrian Christians were originally Brahmins whom “Saint Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity”. Then after, those Brahmins started following Christianity but they maintained the sense of being Brahmins as well, that is why they follow the Hindu orthodox of untouchability and do not touch the untouchables.

In the opening chapter of the novel, we are introduced with Reverend John Ipe, the head of the Ipe family, who was a priest of the Mar Thoma Church and well known in the Christian Community. He was generally known as the *Punnyan Kunju* – Little Blessed One – and people came to him to be blessed. There was also a legend behind becoming his *Punnyan Kunju*. When he was seven years old, his father took him to see a Patriarch who was visiting the Syrian Christians of Kerala and that Patriarch blessed the little boy who kissed his hand innocently. The novel basically focuses on the lives of Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Chacko, Rahel, Estha etc. who are the descendants of Reverend Ipe.

Ammu, the daughter of Pappachi, returned to Ayemenem from Delhi after the retirement of her father’s job as the Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute. As Ammu did not want to stay there, so, she left Ayemenem to live with one of her distant aunts in Calcutta. There at someone else’s wedding reception she met Baba, a Bengali Hindu, who was on vacation from his job in Assam where he worked as an assistant manager of a tea estate. His family was once a wealthy *zamindar* who migrated to Calcutta from East Bengal after partition. Soon after their meeting Baba proposed Ammu for the marriage and Ammu accepted the proposal. Consequently, she informed her parents about her decision but they did not reply because they were not happy with Ammu’s decision as Baba was a Hindu. Ammu had an elaborate Bengali wedding in traditional Hindu way. She had dressed totally like a Bengali bride, “Her silk sunset-coloured sari shot with gold. Rings on every finger. White dots of sandalwood paste over her arched eyebrows” (43).

Ammu’s father-in-law was a Chairman of the Railway Board who gave the young couple “a custom-painted, powder-pink Fiat” full of jewellery as a present on their wedding reception. He died soon after their marriage and his cremation happened with a traditional Hindu way which was attended by a lot of people. After that, both Ammu and Baba moved to Assam where Ammu became a center of the Planters Club. She wore backless blouses with her sari and carried a silver lame purse on a chain, totally like the aristocrats. She also wore flowers in her hairs which is an integral part of South-Indian culture as women in South-India normally wear flowers in their hairs because it is an important part of their make-up. Soon after their marriage, Ammu delivered the twins – Rahel and Estha, and when they were only two years old Ammu left her husband because he drank a lot and lied without reasons. When she returned to her parent’s home, she was deprived of all the authorities because traditionally the girls do not have any right at their parent’s home after their marriage. According to Baby Kochamma:

...a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage Baby Kochamma would chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (45-46).

Baby Kochamma does not like Rahel and Estha for being half-hindu and half-christian hybrids (from a Bengali father and a Christian mother) whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian will ever marry. The twins are brought-up in a traditional Syrian Christian way although they belong to a Hindu father. They also have their father’s quality of blowing spit-bubbles and shivering their legs which Ammu does not like at all and tells them that only clerks behave like that, not aristocrats. Here, it can be said that human behavior is always governed by the class consciousness. The child, Rahel, is always seen in frock, knicker, pyjama, Bata sandals and “a Love-in Tokyo fountain” on her head; and Estha in jeans and T-shirt, trouser and shirt with his “Elvis Puff” and “beige and pointy shoes” like the aristocrats. They have their toy wristwatch that has the time painted on it – ten to two, and red plastic sunglasses.

Chacko, the son of Pappachi, after completing his earlier education from Delhi went to Rhodes College of Oxford in London to complete his graduation. As it has become a fashion for the higher classes to send their children to study in foreign universities where they adopt the cultures of the foreign land and start practicing them as well. It can be said that migration is the most basic reason behind the multiculturalism in this era of globalization. If people migrate from one land to another then it is very obvious that they start following the cultures of that land too, whether consciously or unconsciously. In London, Chacko met to Margaret Kochamma – an English woman, and married her immediately. She also gave birth to a daughter of Chacko named, Sophie Mol, who is an example of the hybridization of two different races: an Indian man and an English woman. According to Turner Terence, “Multiculturalism is one manifestation of postmodernist reaction to the delegitimization of the state and the erosion of the hegemony of the dominant culture in advanced capitalist countries” (419).

However, the marriage of Chacko and Margaret did not last long. Margaret left Chacko for her new love Joe whom she married later. After returning from England, being a Rhodes Scholar, Chacko joined as a lecturer at the Christian College in Madras from where he resigned after Pappachi’s death and returned to Ayemenem. After the death of Joe in a car accident, Margaret and Sophie were left alone in England. Chacko, therefore, invited them to India to celebrate Christmas and the whole family went to pick-up them from the Cochin Airport. As they were coming India for the first time, everyone prepared a lot for their welcome to show them a sense of *Atithi Devo Bhavah*. Mammachi prepared a welcome cake for Sophie Mol on which “Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol” was written. Chacko who generally wore a *mundu* (a *mundu* is a common South-Indian dress normally wear by men) preferred suit and tie that day. Baby Kochamma forced Estha and Rahel to speak in English only. She even told them, “Don’t forget that you are Ambassadors of India. You’re going to form their First Impression of your country” (139). When Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol arrived at the airport, they were dressed totally in western style. Sophie Mol was in her bellbottom frock and a hat on her head along with her made in England go-go bag, and Margaret Kochamma was in her flowered printed frock with open legs underneath it. Chacko’s family liked Sophie Mol more than Rahel and Estha because she was an offspring of two Christians even though from different races, as Indian society is always governed by the caste system. Her skin was white, her eyes were blue, her hair was brown-red like her mother but she had Pappachi’s nose.

After the death of Sophie Mol, Ammu sent Estha to their father, who, by then, had resigned from his only tea estate job in Assam and shifted to Calcutta to work for a company that made carbon black. Estha faced the problems of accepting new cultures there as he was sent into a Bengali-Hindu family. Rahel was sent to a Nazareth Convent School for her primary education in Ayemenem, and after completing her school, she went to the College of Architecture in Delhi for her higher education. There she met Larry McCaslin – an American, who was in Delhi to collect materials for his Ph.D. thesis. He saw Rahel for first time in the school’s library and then again a few days later in Khan Market, she was in jeans and a white T-shirt. He attracted towards her at first sight. Soon, they married and left for America, but after sometime they got divorced, as Larry McCaslin was offended by her eyes because they behaved in such a way as they belonged to someone else. After that, Rahel worked as a waitress at an Indian restaurant in New York for a few months and then for several years as a night clerk in a bullet-proof cabin at a gas station outside Washington. Then Baby Kochamma informed her about Estha’s return to Ayemenem, who was sent to his father in Calcutta after the death of Sophie Mol. Their father had been retired from his carbon black job and was immigrating to Australia for his new post as Chief of Security at a ceramics factory and could not take Estha with him. Rahel and Estha returned to Ayemenem after twenty three years.

Baby Kochamma whose real name was Novami Ipe, the daughter of Reverend Ipe, but everyone called her Baby and she became Baby Kochamma when she was old enough to be called an aunt. At the age of eighteen, she fell in love with an Irish priest, Father Mulligan from Madras, who was in Kerala to study Hindu Scriptures. After a few years, Father Mulligan returned to Madras, leaving Baby Kochamma behind. On the hope that she would get more opportunities to meet Mulligan, Baby Kochamma entered a convent and became a nun there and converted herself into a Roman Catholic. When her father came to know about all these things, he brought her back from the convent and sent her to the Rochester College of America from where she returned with a diploma in Ornamental Gardening. Baby Kochamma embodies in her both the Indian and western culture as well. She wears sari and blouse and carries a lot of jewellery like rings,

diamond-earrings, gold bangles and a beautifully crafted flat gold chain like the traditional Indian women. She also keeps a rosary which she plays on her fingers. She uses make-up at the age of eighty-three even – dyes her hairs jet black, applies new hair-cuts, uses lipstick on her lips and wears night-gowns – which is an impression of the post-modern Indian society. She is passionate about American TV shows like WWF, American NBA league games, The Bold and The Beautiful, Santa Barbara etc. When Baby Kochamma comes to know about the arrival of Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol at Ayemenem, she makes life miserable for Estha and Rahel. She starts teaching them English and insists them to speak in English only and whenever they speak in Malyalam, they pay the price for it in the form of writing “impositions” that “I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English” at least hundred times each. She even makes them practice an English car-song for the way back and they have to form the words properly and have be careful particularly about their pronunciation.

Pappachi, the son of Reverend Ipe, was very conventional in his mentality. He did not consider higher education worth for girls, beat his wife regularly and did not allow the untouchables in the house. But in his living manner, he was totally an “Anglophile” as his son Chacko calls him. Chacko also tells the twins, “...though he [Pappachi] hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away (52). Pappachi always wore a well pressed three-piece-suit, his riding boots and a gold pocket watch, even at the time of his death. He also had a car named, Plymouth, which was his favorite one and he did not allow anyone to touch it. His wife Mammachi was completely a typical Indian wife who never opposed her husband who exploited her. She always wore sari-blouse and heavy jewellery like a traditional Indian woman. As wearing sari-blouse and jewellery has a long traditional value to Indian culture.

Another important character in the novel is Velutha, who is an untouchable. He always wears a *mundu* and his upper body always remains bare as the untouchables are not allowed to cover their upper bodies. We find a description of many untouchables of Ayemenem, like *Parayan*, *Paravan*, *Pulayan* etc. in the novel. The Caste System, in Indian society, has been prevalent since ancient times. During ancient times, the Indian society was divided into four *jaties* – *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. The shudras were the untouchables and they were not allowed to touch anything. In the *Manu Smiriti*, the Hindu law book of social code and domestic life, we find a pathetic condition of the untouchables who were deprived of gaining knowledge, particularly, the Vedic knowledge and had no liberty to listen the incantations of the Vedas or any other great scriptures. They had no right to go the temples and they were also deprived of gaining knowledge and studying Sanskrit language, which is supposed to be the richest language of the world. Moreover, we also get a realistic portrayal of the untouchables, before the independence, in the novel. Mammachi tells Estha and Rahel:

She could remember a time, in her girlhood, when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins and Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s Footprints...were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their-upper bodies... They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed (73-74).

When the British came to Malabar, Velutha’s grandfather Kelan along with a number of other untouchables embraced Christianity to escape the scourge of untouchability and started practicing the Christian religion. Though they were given their separate churches, separate priests and, in a special favour, they were given even their own separate Pariah Bishop. Soon, they recognized that “they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire” because after 1947, they found that they were not entitled to any government’s benefits like job reservations and bank loans at low interests as they were Christians and therefore casteless. T. K. Oommen expresses his view, “Ancient India’s patricians were caste-Hindus consisting of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, the plebeians were today’s Other Backward Classes; the Shudras above the pollution line. The untouchables of those days were worse than slaves, totally excluded from all aspects of public life” (22). Thus the novel also gives an image of the caste system of India. Ziauddin Sarkar makes a remark, “Postmodernism seeks to give voice to all cultures, decentres the ‘centre’ while making the

‘periphery’ the centre of all cultural action and gives ‘voice’ to the ‘voiceless’, it is projected as a new and great force of liberation.” (236)

Dance, drama, theatre, music and song, every art is unique in itself. In India, religious mythologies and classical literatures form the basis of most of the performing arts. Indian classical dances like Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Kathak, Manipuri, Odissi, Mohiniattam and Kuchipudi, all follow the codes of *Natyashastra*, Hindu mythologies and classical literatures or epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. We also find a description of Kerala’s famous regional dance form Kathakali in the novel in which the Hindu mythologies related to Karna and Kunti that how Kunti revealed her secret to Karna, how Poothana suckled young Krishna at her poisoned breast, how Bhima disemboweled Dushasana and bathed Draupadi’s hair in his blood, are being performed well through the dancers of Kathakali. We also find description of the Kathakali on the Cochin Airport where with a picture of Kathakali dancer it was written, “*Kerala Tourism Development Corporation Welcomes You* with the Kathakali dancer doing a Namaste” (139). In India, Namaste is the most common way of greeting the outsiders and elders of Hindu families. At one place in the novel, we also find some South-Indian Hindu pilgrims who are on their way to the temple of Tirupati and they all have shaved their heads. As the South-Indian Hindus believe that before going into the Tirupati temple it is compulsory to shave the heads. These pilgrims are also singing ‘bhajan’. Bhajan is a kind of religious song sung in the praise of God.

As the novel is about the Syrian Christians of Kerala, so it is also replete with the Christian cultures as well. At the very beginning of the novel, we see the burial ceremony of Sophie Mol according to Christian rituals. She had a special child-sized coffin in which she lay in her “yellow Crimplene bellbottoms” frock with her ribboned hair and her “made-in-England go-go bag”. Everybody had a hymnbook in their hands and they all sung the hymn during her funeral. The coffin was buried into the ground under a little cemetery behind the church. We also get the references of the *Bible* and the Christian mythological characters like Christ, Satan, Angel Gabriel etc. in the novel. The idea of the ‘original-sin’, heaven and hell are also being reflected at many places. As Rasheeduddin Khan depicts: “India has been one of the greatest confluences of cultural strands, a laboratory of racial intermixing, of cross-fertilization of religious ideas and secular thought, of coexistence of language and dialects, a veritable microcosm of the globe” (35).

As India is a land of a number of religions and a number of cultures, hence we find a number of cuisines too. Every region has its own special cuisine. If North-India has *chole-bhature*, *rajma-chawal*, *kadhi-chawal*, *dhokla*, *daal-bati-churma* etc, then South-India is also not behind in this race. Everything from *dosa*, *sambher*, *idly*, *uttam* to *appam*, *meen* etc. has its own speciality among Indian foods. We also find a description of some South-Indian dishes in the novel like *kappa*, *meen*, *vevichathu*, *laddoo* etc. The novel also has some glimpses of the post-modern Indian foods like roasted-chicken, finger-chips, sweet-corn, chicken-soup, vanilla-ice-cream, chocolate-sauce, orange-drink, lemon-drink, coca-cola etc.

Language, which is an integral part of any society has an important role in its culture too because it is a way of expression. As India is a land of multi-languages: language here like culture differs from state to state. As Arundhati Roy herself belongs to a Malyali background, a lot of Malyalam words occur in her novel like *punnyan-kunju* (a little blessed), *pappachi* (father), *mammachi* (mother), *kochamma* (aunty), *mol* (a little girl), *mon* (a little boy), *onner*, *runder*, *monner* (one, two, three), *chacher*, *chetan*, *ammaven*, *aiyyo*, *ayo-yo*, *chhi-chhi*, *kushumbi*, *kandoo*, *pada-patti* etc. We also find many references of English with Indianised construction like *Amayrica* (America), *orlways* (always), *rej-oice* (rejoice), *porketmunny* (pocket-money) etc. An Indian expression of English, with non-standard spellings, accentuate the local accent and dialect. Roy also uses many Hindi and Urdu words throughout the novel like *khaki*, *dhoti*, *payjama*, *dhobi*, *namaste*, *inquilab-zindabad* etc.

To conclude, we can quote Roy’s idea of ‘Pickle’ and compare it with Salman Rushdie’s idea of ‘Chuttni’ very well. Chuttni is a mixture of many different ingredients which forms something new that enhances the beauty of Indian food. The pickle, in the same way, is also a mixture of many different ingredients that forms a new one. Roy has very beautifully used the symbol of ‘pickle’ to symbolize the uniqueness of Indian culture which is also an amalgamation of different religions, customs, traditions,

festivals, cuisines, dance, music, art and craft, and many more things which give a new dimension to India Culture which is totally different from other countries. Sudarshan affirms:

Unity in diversity, an oft-repeated aspiration in India, seeks to accommodate differences within a framework of shared basic values and common interests. Such a framework requires the conviction that unity is best fosters by tolerating diversity, that dissenting views should freely coexist with the dominant values of society, and interaction among diverse peoples, ethnic and religious groups, cultures and sub-cultures is a positive force for creativity, innovation and change (101).

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