

Identity under Cross-Cultural Influences in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)

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ملخص:

في سياقات ما بعد الاستعمار بشكل عام وفي سياق ما بعد الاستعمار الهندي بشكل خاص، تعد الهوية وعملية تشكيلها مفهوماً معقداً وموضوعاً رائجاً في ان واحد للمناقشة والعرض في أدب ما بعد الاستعمار، و باعتباره عملاً أدبياً شرقياً لحقبة ما بعد الاستعمار، يبدو ان الكاتبة أرونداتي روي في روايتها " إله الأشياء الصغيرة" تقدم صورة صادقة وموثوقة للمجتمع الهندي من حيث هويته، وجنسه، وعرقه، وطائفته، وتاريخه، وثقافته، ودينه، وثقافته ولغته. ولهذا تتناول الرواية السياق الثقافي المعقد والمتعدد الأوجه للبلاد مع ارتباط وثيق بمسألة تشكيل هوية الناس. حيث من الواضح أن هذا العمل الروائي يصور ويتناول تلك التعقيدات والجوانب المتعددة الثقافات لسباق كبير الا ما بعد الاستعمار، ومن خلالها على امتداد السياق الهندي ككل. وبناء عليه، تهدف الورقة البحثية الحالية إلى دراسة عملية تشكيل هويات الأفراد كما تظهر من خلال شخصيات الرواية في سياق هذه التأثيرات العابرة للثقافات. كما تهدف أيضاً إلى التحقيق في كيفية أن هذه الجوانب العبر ثقافية ليس فقط ينتج عنها وتمارس تأثير هائل على تشكيل وبناء الهوية، ولكن أيضاً كيف أن محاولات تحديها أو مقاومتها غالباً ما يكون مصيرها الفشل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إله الأشياء الصغيرة، أرونداتي روي، الهوية، تشكيل الهوية، التأثيرات عبر الثقافية

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a renowned postcolonial literary narrative that provides valuable insights into the Indian postcolonial spectrum that is complex and multilayered. The novel vividly and delicately portrays the fine kitting and interweaving of various cross-cultural aspects, their complexities and their

influence of the experiences of individuals and on the construction of their identity in postcolonial India.

In that order, Roy's narrative generally presents the diversity and assortment of the Indian culture with all its variations in terms of races, languages, religions and the like. Through the lives and life events of its characters—more particularly Ammu's children Estha and Rahel—the novel describes the elaborate and complicated aspects of the Indian context. By extension, the novel's narrative exhibits the workings and particulars of the characters personal dealings as a demonstration of such cultural complexities.

As case in point, the love affair between Ammu and Velutha seems an attempt that “defies caste boundaries”, but one that also reveals “the harsh consequences of transgressing cultural norms. Roy showcases the tragic repercussions of love in a society marked by deeply ingrained prejudices,” (Farzand 4). Hence, as an enduring postcolonial literary work, *The God of Small Things* persists in highlighting the weighty interplay and interrelation of cross-cultural, historical and social influences in postcolonial India and their effect on shaping people's identities.

After all, cultural identity is a sensitive and important concept to write about. It is also a difficult and complex topic as it entails all the discursive elements of society. As such, identity is a discursive construct of society; it is socially, politically, culturally and otherwise constructed: “In understanding the complexity of cultural identity, one could analyze critically the in- between spaces which lead to new signs of identity and innovative sights of collaboration and contestation in the act of

defining the idea of society itself,” (Bhabha 2). Hence, identity is a complex and multifaceted construct that significantly influences people’s lives in terms of their life’s views, their experiences, their understanding and even their relations and attitudes.

Some would also assume that Roy’s novel reflects her own experience as an Indian woman “rethinking and reconstructing her identity,” (Bedjaoui 4). Such statement might have been grounded on the assumption that the novel’s heroine is also shown to be marginalized by social and cultural considerations within her own context. The writer is a woman and the protagonist is a woman and as such we might assume that “the novel shows a woman’s constant struggle to seek a sense of ‘identity’ and establish her individuality in a completely hostile and avaricious society,” (Dang 6). Yet again, Roy’s novel could broadly be approached as a narrative text that depicts and negotiates “cross-cultural undercurrents, ..., reflecting partly Indian values and flavor, i.e. their Indianness,” (Bedjaoui 1). In so doing, the novel quite apparently invites the attention to and discusses the influence of such cross-cultural influences on the shaping of identity within this peculiar context.

Besides, the novel presents language difference and linguistic variations as cross-cultural influences on the shaping of its characters identities. It combines in its narrative the Keralan native language Malayalam along with the English language, which essentially entails the bringing together of two different cultures as well. Interconnecting two different languages and cultures would eventually play a significant role as a cross-cultural influence on the people involved not only in terms

of shaping their identity—a cultural identity apparently—but also on their attitudes, experiences and life itself. The novel obviously addresses that when, for instance, Pappachi’s family head to the airport to pick-up Margaret and Sophie Mol, the twins are told to behave like an “ambassador of India”. In that regard, Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Estha, in addition to others like Sophie Mol and Margaret, would best illustrate such an influence.

Identity under Cross-Cultural Influences in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

The God of Small Things is Arundhati Roy’s first and introductory narrative work that won him the Man Booker Prize. The novel revolves apparently around the love and life stories and experiences of some children who share the same father. Fictionalizing a Keralan native place called Ayemenem, the novel portrays how the life of those children is ruined by their environment’s cultural backgrounds such as caste and multiculturalism. It skillfully and gracefully portrays how the lives of its characters like Estha, Rahel, Ammu, Velutha, Chacko, Sophie mol and others are momentarily affected and influenced—perhaps eventually ruined—by such small things.

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is a marvelous literary narrative that enriches readers’ knowledge and understanding of what identity is and how it is shaped and influenced. The novel explores, depicts and presents a variety of aspects and factors such as race, gender, caste, social elements, politics and cultures with relation to identity. It artistically and beautifully demonstrates how such factors sway

significant influence on identity and how it is constructed and shaped. The novel's narrative quite delicately and in an involving manner brings together such variety of factors and highlights the role they play on forming an individual's identity.

Besides, the narratives in Roy's novel includes lively descriptions, complicated character development, and an appealing style of telling the story so as to further illuminate readers into the various and complex processes of shaping identity across influences, cultures and the like. Arundhati Roy has skillfully and elegantly addressed and presented such complexities and intricacies of cultural identity construction in his novel. In addition to the unique narrative of the novel, its characters perform and present events in a way that nicely and brilliantly explores and negotiates the multiple and multifaceted nature of constructing a cultural identity and the various influences that shape it.

More particularly, Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores and engages deeply into the complexities and various influences of building a cultural identity within an Indian context, which is multiple, diverse and complex: "Every human being has [their] own personal identity that relies on a sense of who he is in relation to the larger community, the nation," (Moosavinia 29). The novel apparently presents and describes the Indian postcolonial community of Kerala as a local setting, but with connection to the English culture as well.

As such, the novel presents a mosaic picture of the Indian context of Kerala after independence; "it describes the religious, socio-cultural, and political setting in Kerala society in the latter half of the twentieth century," (Mudgal 155). Through its

characters, the novel draws the attention of its readers into the realization of how difficult and intriguing it is for the shaping of an individual's identity against the various social and cultural influences. It shows how shaping an individual's identity is faced and obstructed by a variety of social and cultural backgrounds and norms that eventually lead to a state of inequality and injustice as well.

Through her native cultural background, Roy's narrative seems to be significantly enriched and authentically flavored through the amalgamation of native elements of language, idioms and expressions. More importantly, the novel demonstrates through such linguistic, racial and cultural diversity the complex processes of constructing and shaping cross-cultural identities and the various elements that influence such formation of identities.

Recognizing the fact that Roy herself manifests what could be said a cross-cultural identity as a half-Malayali, half-Bengali individual, one might arrive at a better understanding of the novel and what it is all about. Roy's novel thus highlights such an issue through various characters such as Chacko and Margaret and Ammu and Sophie mol. Chacko is an Indian man while his wife Margaret is an English woman. Likewise, Ammu is Indian while Sophie mol is only half-Indian as the other half is English.

Therefore, though appearing as a personal account with relation to the novelist's social and cultural background, the novel would be nothing less than an excellent literary manifestation of the influence of culture and other related variants not only on the shaping of an individual's identity, but also on their sense of self,

knowledge and understanding of life, reality and the world: “Roy’s portrayal demonstrates how cultural norms and values can both provide a sense of belonging and limit individual agency, contributing to the complexities of identity formation within a specific cultural context,” (Yasir 48).

The identity of Ammu, for example, is cross-culturally constructed and influenced. The novel presents her as an Indian divorced woman, and as such her identity has to be subjected to and is influenced by certain social and cultural constraints. It seems that defaming and thus marginalizing a divorced woman is an Indian social and cultural norm so to speak.

Ammu’s identity, therefore, is branded, disregarded and sidelined, which seemingly corresponds to social traditions and cultural norms in an Indian context: “The cultural context of Kerala, India, with its rigid caste system, influences Ammu’s identity and her experiences of love, desire, and societal judgment,” (Roy 97). It is thus apparent that social and cultural backgrounds have influenced not only Ammu’s identity but also her very sense of herself, how she thinks and even how she has to pursue the remaining of her life.

Since the novel explores and negotiates how cross-cultural aspects interconnect and influence each other—eventually influencing the construction of individuals’ identities—Ammu and Velutha would offer such a case. In their case, Ammu and Velutha’s identities are shaped through the interconnected influence of cross-cultural backgrounds such as caste, economic status, gender marginalization and others.

In terms of marriage, for example, the marriage institutions and caste norms in Indian culture disavow and reject intermarriages when it comes to a lower caste individual or a member of the untouchable caste. In other social and cultural terms, the caste of the untouchables is stigmatized, downgraded and dehumanized on social, cultural and even religious considerations though they are no less capable, no less qualified and at the core of it no less human beings. Yet, because of such social exclusion and cultural discrimination, the untouchables are usually cornered and thus turn to doing certain low and/or odd jobs:

Many of the untouchables are talented and brilliant. They can do all works as good as the touchable do. But because the identity of ‘untouchable’ labeled them, they can nor develop or actualize their selves. Likewise, here Velutha works like a little magician. He could do wonderful things like making tiny windmills and minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds. (Sharmely 199)

For Ammu again, when she gets an arranged marriage and has Estha and Rahel out of it, she comes back to her family as a divorced woman and as such is received and treated both by family and society as a guilty and condemned individual. Besides, in her love affair with Velutha, Ammu thinks for a moment that she has escaped the admonishment of her family and of society and that she would finally find sanctuary and protection in loving Velutha but soon gets disillusioned. Her brother Chacko, her mother Mammachi and even Velutha’s father all condemn her for that love. Although Ammu is a Christian woman, she is denied the right of loving Velutha just because Velutha belongs to the caste of the untouchables.

Therefore, Ammu and Velutha’s identities are shaped by the coming together of all these influences:

Their identities are shaped not only by their caste but also by their class position and the societal constraints imposed upon them. Roy emphasizes how these intersecting aspects of identity interact to shape characters' experiences and opportunities within a highly stratified society. (Yasir 55)

Likewise, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel are driven to the background; they are deprived of having a voice or authority of any sort and even denied the unalienable rights of personal freedom and self choice. Just as Ammu and Velutha, they are subjected to social marginalization and gender discrimination in their pursuit of selfhood and identity on the ground of cross-cultural influences. Through these characters, the novel demonstrates how cross-cultural aspects such as gender, caste, class and others sway tremendous influence on the shaping of individuals' identities.

It could thus be assumed that the construction of identity under cross-cultural influences does not necessarily entail just different cultures; it could as well involve race, gender, caste and even religion:

Arundhati Roy's debut novel portrays the theme that everything in nature has its own identity and significance yet they are interdependent. This theory resembles that the characters are united against their individual point of view. Every character has its own significance but none is protagonist. In the novel the feel, sensitivity, bitterness and humanism are clearly visible to the reader's eyes. The hopeless struggle of human beings is vividly depicted through all the characters. (Raghavendra 382)

Accordingly, the novel explores and examines the role played by social and hierarchical culture, political culture and caste culture as well in shaping an individual's identity. The caste system in postcolonial India, for instance, is a long engrained and deeply rooted social culture that plays a crucial role in shaping characters' identities. The Indian caste system along with certain political and

cultural ideologies and social cultures interconnect and come together to eventually influence how an individual's identity is shaped and how their life choices are determined as well.

Ammu and Velutha, as mentioned above, provide the best illustrating example of identity construction within such cross-cultural influences. In that vein, it could be conceived how Ammu's identity, for example, is influenced by a complex range of aspects. As a woman and divorced, her identity is influenced by practices of discrimination that are gender-based and by social and cultural traditions in this regard. As a member of a lower caste, her social status is faced and influenced by social and patriarchal expectations for a member—more particularly a female member—of such caste. Those gender, social, cultural and caste influences have further worsened her case leading to an aggravating marginalization and greater social restrictions. Hence, what the novel depicts in Ammu's case is the interconnection of cross-cultural influences in the shaping of an individual's identity.

In addition to Ammu and Velutha, her children Estha and Rahel are other individuals whose identity goes through and is subjected to cross-cultural influences in the way of its shaping. Estha's identity has to be shaped within a complex web of social and political backgrounds and cultures. So long as the novel settings is postcolonial India, Estha has no choice but to grow up and live in such an environment that is politically turbulent and socially hierarchical.

As a member of such community, Estha experiences some personal ordeals and goes through certain societal pressures as well. In such context, Estha struggles with

questions and issues of belonging, of selfhood and inevitably of identity. The novel thus shows how such intricate spectrum of cross-cultures is challenging for Estha and therefore for any individual of such community to proclaim and stress their identity.

With relation to that and since the novel brings together two cultures and two different cultural backgrounds—the Indian and the English—there appears to be a great influence to be swayed by such cultural variant on the shaping of identity of individuals belonging to both cultures:

When two or more than two cultures cross to each other, both the cultures are affected by each other. It is obvious that powerful culture always dominant but to some extent it also affected by native cultures. For instance Picasso's art was greatly influenced by history of African masks. (Bharti 166)

The best illustrating case of such cultural influence on shaping identity in the novel is the presentation and description of Estha and Rahel who are Indian twins and Sophie Mol who is an English girl.

Sophie Mol is English, white and thus the novel presents her with angelic qualities and endorses her with unparalleled worth and value. The narrative describes Sophie literally as a “little angel”, whereas it portrays Estha and Rahel with demonic qualities plainly calling them “little demons”, who are “mud brown. With forehead that might turn into horns with fountains in love-in Tokyos... And if you cared to look, you could see Satan in their eyes,” (Roy 179).

In a different instance in the novel, the narrative through Baby Kochamma presents Sophie as “so beautiful that she reminded her [Kochamma] of a wood-sprite. Of Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*,” (Roy 144). Nevertheless, the narrative depicts the Indian twins—Estha and Rahel—again through Kochamma as she

speculates stating that they “are sly, uncouth and deceitful. They are growing wild you can’t manage them,” (*ibid* 149). Conceivably, virtue, civility and worth are qualities the novel seems to attribute to whiteness, whereas maliciousness, savagery and coarseness are qualities the novel voluntarily and unscrupulously confers upon brownness.

Sophie Mol as an English and white has become a blessing for her half-brother Chacko and her Indian twin cousins, Rahel and Estha. She is even received by almost everyone with warm welcome and joy as a sign of good luck:

The twins squatted on their haunches, like professional adults gossip in the Ayemenem market.

They sat in silence for a while. Kuttappen mortified, the twins preoccupied with boat thought.

‘Has Chacko Saar’s Mol come?’ Kuttappen asked.

‘Must have Rahel said laconically.

‘Where is she?’

‘Who knows? Must be around somewhere. We don’t know.

‘Will you bring her here for me to see?’

‘Can’t, ‘Rahel said.

‘Why not?’

‘She has to stay indoors. She’s very delicate. If she gets dirty she’ll die.’

(Roy 209-10)

Therefore, the attribution of such positive and valuable qualities to one individual and negative and demonic traits to another on the ground of skin color and cultural background would most apparently influence the shaping of identity of such individuals, their sense of self and even touch down to the core of their being. Such an influence goes beyond merely shaping the identity; it goes further to demonstrate itself on a wider range of aspects and attitudes until it eventually engulfs the act of living as a whole.

Furthermore, the effect and influence of the English cultural background reaches up to Pappachi Kochamma and demonstrates itself fully on his character and identity. He is an Indian individual by race, birth, language and skin color, but is one whose identity seems to be cross-culturally influenced and shaped. First, Pappachi Kochamma does not appear to be fully convinced with his Indian culture, language and cultural background. For example, Pappachi has all his life refused to wear “the traditional mumundu and khaki Judhpurs”, and “until the day he died, he wore a well prepared three-piece suit and his gold pocket watch,” (Roy 51, 49). His Indian identity has not been fully shaped as such. There seems to be a lack that he needs for a final and complete construction of his identity.

In that order, English culture and language have assumingly provided for that lack; “In *The God of Small Things*, there are some characters who are very fascinated with the White identity and others are struggling for the complete self. Pappachi is the great admirer of the British culture and language, and consider it, the culture of elite class,” (Bharti 168). Hence, the novel describes Pappachi as one who holds the English culture, language and everything else they stand for in high regard.

Making sure to look like the English, act like the English and embrace and copy as much English as he can, Pappachi’s identity is obviously deemed a cross-cultural product: “Roy in her novel narrates clearly how the colonized people appreciate the English culture and their considerable effort to become like them by way of imitation,” (Behbood 1028). Working for many years with the English in an Imperial Entomologist Government service in Delhi, the novel describes him as a

“person well-disposed to the English” and “the correct word to describe people like him is anglophile” as “his mind had been brought into a state which made him like the English” (Roy 52). His identity has thus been tremendously influenced by cross-cultural aspects that have ultimately shaped it into a cross-cultural identity.

Above and beyond, what the novel describes and portrays in the form of language difference and linguistic varieties also play a role as a cross-cultural influence that eventually affects the shaping of an individual’s identity. In terms of the linguistic and diction culture, the narrative integrates Keralan native language Malayalam along with English throughout the novel. Such amalgamation of languages, dictions and linguistic variations would apparently reflect different cultures that would eventually bring about different social hierarchies.

Language and its use, as the novel portrays, does not operate in isolation; it rather seems to be closely connected to various other aspects such as cultural contexts, caste, social status, and of course level of education. This linguistic context brings about a state of bilingualism that in turn facilitates a dialogue between and an understanding of different languages, different cultures and in the long run offers a privilege for those who opt for both languages. Besides, such bilingual context would assumingly influence the shaping of a particular identity of those bilingual individuals and others as well. In that respect, the novel shows Estha and Rahel as privileged in this regard. They know both English and Malayalam and as bilinguals they could easily switch between these two languages as far as the people with whom they network change or the context requires.

Accordingly, the novel clearly highlights and accentuates the power of language and how linguistic choices of an individual influence the construction of their identity and even their sense of selfhood: “language is a part of ‘the cultural identity toolbox’, and lacking one of the tools, makes you unable to fully connect to your cultural identity,” (Oddershede 155). After all, language as linguists and language theorists contend is never a passive agent; it is an active agent for it is always doing something.

In view of that, language and its employment in the novel would not just be a medium of expressing oneself, but also an agent of constructing realities and shaping identities as well: “Arundhati Roy employs various linguistic choices and narrative techniques to effectively portray the complexities of identity in her work,” (Yasir 56). Therefore, the variety of narrative techniques and linguistic choices employed in the novel reveal the complex web of cultural influences including the linguistic one that play a crucial role in shaping identity.

In terms of social culture and hierarchy, language also seems to have a role to play and a connection to establish with such variants. It seems like language plays a double role in this regard though; it both defies and buttresses all at once such societal power dynamics and social hierarchies. In this order, Roy’s narrative work apparently exhibits that language as employed in the text can function as a means of domination and repression, but it can also be the medium of resistance and opposition.

In view of that, it is assumed that language could underpin and emphasize the current hierarchies of society once it represents, reproduces and maintains the existing disparities of power. As long as inequalities and social injustices exist in a human community and are the prime feature of it—resembling to a great extent the Indian social context of Kerala as presented in the novel—there will definitely be dominant and dominated groups in such society.

In such a context, the leading groups usually tend to adopt and enforce their language and linguistic choices as a form of prestige and the standard medium of communication. In so doing, other languages and linguistic varieties are sidelined, disregarded and even denounced:

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy portrays how English, associated with colonizers and the upper class, is considered a symbol of privilege and higher social status. The characters' use of English or Malayalam reflects their position within the social hierarchy and reinforces the power dynamics embedded in language choices. (Yasir 57)

As a result, gaps and divisions are created between these linguistically contrasting groups, which eventually lead to strengthening social hierarchies and power relations of such a community. However, language could also reclaim and retrieve the downgraded languages and linguistic varieties, and as such turns into a powerful and effective toll for defying and undermining the existing power relations and social hierarchies. In so doing, language presents the marginalized with the chance to “assert their cultural identity and resist the hegemony of dominant languages. Linguistic resistance can challenge power imbalances and provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard,” (*ibid*). Accordingly, language

seemingly stands for an aspect of cross-cultural influence that affects the construction of the identity of the people involved.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout this paper it has become apparent how numerous different factors such as race, gender, class, nationality, age, religion, culture, social and historical context in addition to different languages and linguistic variations intersect and influence the shaping of an individual's identity. The discussion and analysis of the novel has clearly demonstrated that almost all characters of the novel have been exposed to and influenced by the variety of those cross-cultural aspects in the process of shaping their identity.

It has also been revealed how strongly influential such cross-cultural factors are in constructing individuals' identities and even directing their life as a whole. This has obviously and vividly shown and investigated in the instances of Ammu and Velutha in their attempt to challenge and resist such backgrounds. Although they have decided to defy such norms and go beyond such boundaries, they have eventually failed and had even to bear the heavy and destructive consequences of their defiance. In the long run, their identity as well as other characters identities such as Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Estha and Rahel, Sophie and Margaret are positioned and shaped within these cross-cultural influences whether they have resisted or embraced the process.

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