

Post-Modern Narrative Framework in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Post-modernism favours seeing the world in more rhetorical terms as a field of contending smaller narrative, where people strive to make their point of view and their interests paramount by making the narratives more convincing. Such is the case of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. There is a definite story here but a multitude of different stories that form a kaleidoscopic view of events and experiences countered by the characters of the book. Post-modernism celebrates instability in point of views thus giving a work either several beginnings or several endings. Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things' is also a book with several beginnings and an abrupt end. Magic realism a prominent tool is knitted into the framework of the novel. Like most other postmodern novels intertextuality play an important role in the narrative framework of novel. There are numerous allusions to other literary works, religious texts, fairy tales cinema, pop culture etc. Apart from these postmodern narrative features one can find a strong regional flavour, postcolonial, subaltern and feminist issues neatly woven into its narrative framework. In short, *The God of Small Things* adopts a postmodern narrative framework. The fractured temporality, intertextual references, magic realism, linguistic whimsicality and playfulness, black comedy, irony are some subversive devices to undermine both Indian and British colonial society making it one of the most important works of postcolonial Indian fiction.

Keywords: Post-modernism, narrative framework, Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, postcolonial.

Introduction

The development of the postmodern novel as a narrative form owes much to the fragmentary form of the picaresque narrative, diversity of perspectives in epistolary novels of 18th and 19th century realism and 20th century self reflectory modern novel. Post-modernism as a whole, tends to resist definition or classification as a movement. Postmodern fiction makes use of almost every technique that has so far been employed in the narrative tradition.

Postmodern narratives invent new terminology that deconstructs the whole narrative tradition, focuses the fictionality of work [Sur fiction], on the writing process[metafiction], on the ambiguity of meaning [narrative within narrative], on the lack of authenticity [intertextuality], and plays with the narrative language [parody and pastiche]. The Postmodern author uses different narrative elements to problematise the relation between fiction and reality, and argues that there is nothing outside the text that may be supplied. Contemporary writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Orhan Pamuk and Samuel Beckett consciously and intentionally used post-modern narrative techniques. The forerunner of such post-modern narratives is Lawrence Sterne's 18th century satire *Tristram Shandy* and Cervantes *Don Quixote*.

Post-modernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the counter traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* there is a definite story but a multitude of different stories as well that form a kaleidoscope view of events and experiences countered by the characters of the book. The present paper analyses the post-modern narrative framework in *The God of small things*. Before analysing them, it may be useful to explain the various techniques the author uses to narrate the novel.

- Intertextuality, an important element of post-modernism is the acknowledgement of previous literary works. The term intertextuality is first used by Julia Kristeva to refer to the distinction between creativity and activity. She argues that creativity does not assume the existence of an earlier process, material and model. Productivity, on the other hand, assumes a pre-existing raw material. Each so-called new text is a reworking of the existing body of literature. Intertextuality signifies inseparability and inter-involvement of one text with the other texts through allusions, citations, assimilation of formal and substantive features of other texts or by participation in the linguistic and literary conventions that have always existed. Any text, therefore is in fact an Intertext – an intersection of number less other tags that have already been written and said that is going to be written in the future
- Metafiction, an important technique used many post-modern authors to feature their writing, which, essentially, is writing about writing, an attempt to make the reader aware of its fictionality, and, sometimes, the presence of the author. Authors sometimes used this technique to allow for flagrant shifts in narrative, impossible jumps in time, or to maintain emotional distance as a narrator. Metafiction violates the standard novelistic expectations by experimenting with subject matter, form, and temporal sequence; departs from the traditional category of realistic romance.
- Historiographic metafiction, the term "historiographic metafiction coined by Linda Hutcheon referred to works that fictionalised actual historical events or figures. Historiographic metafiction is different from a historical novel. Historiographic metafiction uses and abuses history, which is absent in a historical novel. Thomas

Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon*, for example, features a scene in which George Washington smokes marijuana.

- Irony, playfulness, black humour: post-modern authors were certainly not the first to use irony and humour in their writing, but for many post-modern authors, these became the hallmarks of their Style. They have often treated very serious subjects – World War II, the Cold War, conspiracy theories – from a position of systems and disconnected, and tried to depict their histories ironically and humorously.
- Pastiche many post-modern authors combine, or “pasted” elements of previous genres and styles of literature to create a new narrative voice, or to comment on the writing of their contemporaries. Postmodern authors use elements from detective fiction, science fiction, and war fiction, songs, pop culture references, and well-known, obscure, and fictional history.
- Temporal distortion this is a common technique in post-modernistic fiction fragmentation and non-linear narratives are central features in both modern and post-modern literature. Temporal distortion in modern fiction is used in a variety of ways, often for the sake of irony. Time may also overlap, repeat or bifurcate into multiple possibilities.
- Magic realism is maybe literary work marked by the use of still, sharply defined, smoothly painted images or figures and objects depicted in a surrealistic manner. The themes and subjects are often imaginary, somewhat outlandish and fantastic and with a certain dreamlike quality. Some of the characteristics features of this kind of fiction are the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre, skilful time shifts convoluted and even labyrinthine narrative and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic descriptions, arcane eruditions, the elements of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable.

About the Novel

The main events in *The God of Small Things* take place during some December weeks in 1969 and the setting is Ayemenem, a town in the equatorial south Indian state of Kerala. Seen for the most part through the eyes of Rahel, Ammu's daughter, the narrative moves between two points in time, 1969 and 1993, and the perspective subsequently switches between Rahel seeing things as a seven-year-old girl and an adult woman. 1993 is the year when Rahel returns to Ayemenem to meet her brother Estha after being separated for 31 years. Haunted by memories from the past, the novel is something an excavation of a trauma; Rahel looks back at her life to examine it. Postmodern in its Handling of time, the plot circles between the ‘present’ and the past, digging deeper and deeper into the tragic secrets of Rahel's life with an effect similar to that of a detective story, keeping the reader anxious and curious about how things really happened to the very end. More and more details are added, more and more perspectives are offered as the narrator flashes restlessly forwards and backwards. Out of the many qualities about her novel one is that the reader has the privilege

to see a course of events from several very different vantage points, and this is also reflected in the novel's epigraph: "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one" (John Berger). Roy weaves her plot, thread by thread, into a Colourful, multifaceted story; added to the narrative are different cultural references to Shakespeare, The Sound of Music, Kathakali (traditional drama-dance) and the music of The Rolling Stones which create a patchwork of associations and connotations. But the novel is not just a beautiful and intricate postmodern saga; it is definitely an intervention into (Especially Indian) culture with its close, almost overdone description of caste transgressive intimacy, and its critical account of the local communist leader and Kerala communism in general. We now turn to some relevant strategies that inform us about the narrative Framework of the novel.

Post-modern narrative framework in the Novel 'The God of Small Things'

Post-modernism celebrates instability in point of view thus giving a work either several beginnings or several endings. In 1939, Irish novelist and journalist Flann O'Brien wrote in, what is considered by many to be one of the first works of postmodern fiction, *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

"A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings." [O'Brien, 9].

In the first place, we find that the novel has a number of beginnings. The many beginnings are finely interwoven with the novel's temporal fragmentation, that is, its constant shifting in time and space. One of the story's several beginnings takes place in Ayemenem, Southern India, in the month of May and quickly jumps forward to the next month to Rahel's return and to her brother Estha's 're-return'. We see another beginning and the narrative slides to twenty-three years in the past, to the fateful two-weeks prior to the death of their English cousin, which for the narrator is "in a purely practical sense [...] It all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem "[Roy, 28], these are just a few of the novel's beginnings. Another beginning is the story of a pappachi and his moth. His meditative exposes the family's Anglophile tendencies. Similarly, *The God of Small Things* does not have a definite end, it leaves room for the reader to interpret and end the Novel as they so wish. John Simmons writes that the novel finishes in the middle of the story, but there is no ending just an end to the narration of the events [Benoit, 104]. These several beginnings and abrupt ending exposes a sense of instability; an instability which all the post-modern writers celebrate in their writing.

Moving onto the temporal distortion prevailing in the novel, there is a constant shifting in the time and space. The time shifts between the past and present that gives the novel a sense of imbalance. The novel can be divided into chronological [the timeline of the narrative] and a-chronological [the time relating to history within the novel's context, e, g. the History House, the caste system, the love laws] [99] Roy uses this "fragmentation of chronological time" to highlight the importance of a-chronological time [105]. The novel's temporal framework is not a continuous narrative but a disordered mix of various time that

can only be pieced together by the reader thus we see that the temporal distortion is set into the narrative frame work of the novel to achieve a post-modernistic effect.

The metafictionistic rendering of the Novel can be clearly visualised in the two Central and the interwoven threads. The first traces the traumatic events experienced by an Indian family living in Ayemenem during a two-week period in 1969. The family includes Mammachi, her two grown children, Ammu and Chacko, who are both divorced and have returned home, and Ammu's 7-year-old twins; Rahel, and Estha. Terrible things happen during these two weeks; Estha is molested by a stranger; Chacko's half-English daughter Sophie arrives from America only to drown accidentally; and a love affair between Ammu and an untouchable worker named Velutha which results in Velutha's brutal beating by a group of Policemen, a beat that takes place in front of the twins and that results in his death. The second narrative depicts a day in 1993, when Estha and Rahel meet for the first time in the violent events twenty-three years before, a meeting that culminates in an incestuous sexual encounter. In addition to these two main threads, other stories are told about each of the characters, both before 1969 and after. Roy presents the two central stories in more or less alternating chapters, but each chapter weaves back and forth over that time period, creating a complex series of references and allusions. The narratives are punctuated with repeated flashbacks and images, as present events return in the past, and, inexplicably, future events appear to disrupt the past. The narrative is not a continuous one but a disordered one that can be culled together by the reader. Roy's text echoes the way her characters are experiencing the present moment, one that always senses the already haunted by past and future events. At times, Roy employs a third person omniscient voice that seems to have access to multiple characters; at other times, the voice slips into free indirect discourse, speaking with the style and observations of, say, the young Rahel or the child version of Estha, inviting the reader to see and experience from a particular point of view. This extreme experimental writing of Roy only insists on the fictionality or fabrication of the novels and betrays the construction of reality, which is essentially a postmodern narrative strategy.

Roy further exploits the postmodern tool, historiographic metafiction to the maximum in her debut novel. Historiographic metafiction fictionalises actual historical events. In the novel one can find history [facts] judiciously intertwined with fiction. History and politics are inextricably linked to the narrative framework of the novel. The novel depicts 1969 turbulent India where protest against the caste system was common place. The social events and class relationships in Kerala in the sixties form an integral part. The novel depicts 1957 Marxist government Kerala with EMS Namboothiri as its Chief Minister. The novel also narrates how government had to resign due to the Anti-government strikes led by Congress, which has the support of the church as well. "Fortunately, before the year was out, the peaceful transition came to an end" [Roy, 67]. Roy also relates historical events with what happens to her characters. "Ammu was eight months pregnant when war broke with China" [21]. When Indo Pakistan war began Ammu got separated from her husband "the war with Pakistan began, Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcome to her parents in Ayemenem" [20].

Thus, the novel amalgamates the nation history with the personal history into the narrative framework of the novel either for comic end or for serious effects.

Another important feature post-modern literature is magic realism. Magic realism is a style that has been most widely adopted by Latin American authors including Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende. Roy's fellow Indian writer Salman Rushdie also relies heavily on this style. Magic realism is not overtly present in the novel; it could be argued that the temporal fragmentation hints at magical realism. However, the most obvious use of the style is in the twin's telepathy and their interconnectedness. One always knew when the other was near, they laughed at each other's funny dreams, Rahel knew what the orange drink Lemon drink man did to her brother. And " she remembered the taste of the tomato sandwiches – Estha's sandwiches, that Estha ate – on the Madras Mail to Madras"[7]. Rahel also notice that her cousin, Sophie Mol was awake for her own funeral and performed a "secret cartwheel in her coffin"[9]. This could, however be put down to the post-traumatic stress induced hallucination due to the fact that they had recently witnessed a man being beaten to death. Alex Tickell maintains that if we examine the description of the funeral in more depth Rahel translates the fact that Sophie Mol died 'because she couldn't breathe' into a claustrophobic living burial [Tickell, 57]. Though not explicit, the seeming magical realism is also woven into the narrative framework of the novel.

Intertextuality and pastiche, a postmodern narrative strategy is also diligently woven into the narrative framework of the novel. There are numerous allusions to other literary works history, folklore, fairy tales, cinema, pop culture, etc. In the novel Roy uses many references to 1960 British culture At the airport in cochin, Sophie Mol her, English cousin arrives with go-go bag and "she walk down the runway, the smell of London in her hair" [Roy, 106] Several references are made till last about the hair and her Love-in-Tokyo hair clip. Roy explains that Love-in-Tokyo, a type of hair accessory that comprises two beads on a rubber band. Interestingly Roy alludes to the Love -in-Tokyo which is also the name of a 1960s Indian Bollywood film.

One of the most obvious and important intertextual references are that of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. In the novel "Roy makes several use of metaphor "Heart of Darkness". She says in Ayemenem, in the heart of darkness but about the darkness, about what the darkness is about"[Liddle,1] Heart of Darkness also appears in reference to Kari Saipu and the 'History House' He is referred to as 'Ayemenem's own Kurtz', which is an explicit reference to a central character in Conrad's Novel. Other interesting intertextual reference include The Great Gatsby as a reference to the inherited wealth. Also, the Napoleon and his famous saying "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs" is alluded to the chapter 1; "The Old Omelette and Egg" [Roy,15]. Another instance of an intertextual reference is to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Mammachi's letter to the regional Manager of the Bombay-based pickle factory, Padma Pickles for advice on picking mangoes [125]. Many more instances like Chacko quotes The Great Gatsby, Estha cites A Tale of Two cities, the twin know both The Jungle Book and the parts of Tempest by heart, and the whole

family is captivated by The sound of Music. Roy thus uses intertextuality and pastiche into the framework of the novel to bring out the aimed effect.

Roy is at times whimsical and her tone strikes ironical note and exploits black humour to the utmost in her novel. She achieves these postmodern features through the playful language she adopts. Every incident in the novel where she writes expressions phonetically, uses Malayalam words in English, uses non-standard capitalisation, punctuation and spelling and invents new words and expressions. The characters in the novel are multilingual. Hence the characters in the novel use Malayalam expressions intercalated in English sentence. One of the first examples in the book is the chapter 1 where the police inspector Thomas Matthew informs Ammu “that the Kottayam police didn’t take the sentences from veshyas”[10]. Ammu's inability to legal claim to any property including the pickle factory is clearly depicted in the ironical words “thanks to our wonderful male chauvinistic society” [45]. Expressions like Orange drink Lemon drink man and Locusts stand I [is a Latin expression distorted by the memory of a small child and refers to the legal term locus stand i, which translates literally as "place of standing"]. A couple of instances of Irony black humour which Roy weaves into the narrative framework can be explored through the life of the Pappachi who is seen as quite comic and the clownish. According to his son, Chacko, he was an incurable British CCP which is short for chhi-chhi poach, which in Hindi means ‘shit wiper’. Chacko also calls Pappachi an anglophile [41]. All these humorous expressions are used to represent Pappachi is a symbol as misogynistic society and Roy uses his character to undermine the male dominating chauvinistic society.

Roy also succeeds in bringing out and subalternity, most intriguing and frequently used term that the post-colonial and postmodern writers into her narrative framework. The novel depicts ‘social subaltern’-socially belonging to the marginalised and oppressed class and ‘gendered subaltern’-women as the oppressed and marginalised class. The former represents by the untouchables, Dalit Velutha and the later by Ammu and other female characters in the novel. The novel depicts the subaltern being dehumanised by the dominate hegemonic ideology. It also exposes the Indian social reality. Amidst all the progress, secularism, equal rights and justice the novel actually, shows how these ideologies are jeopardised, and how the subalterns [female and Dalit] are fated to marginalised and constricted life of humiliation and torture. The instances of feminism, apart from the woman being treated as a subaltern, run from the beginning till the end of the novel.

Another term worth considering in regard to the narrative framework of the novel is the Regionalism. The God of Small Things is undoubtedly a regional novel which takes the landscape in Kerala with its customs, manners, social structure, social, cultural and the religious practices and focuses its attention on the life of particular well-defined geographical region-Ayemenem. The Novel includes regional myths, folk songs, local names of people and places, and the vernacular language-Malayalam. This helps the novelist to probe into the working of the society, culture, individuals and many other related issues. The novelist also takes freedom to attack evil social practices like casteism and corruption in the public life.

Conclusion

To conclude, Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is rendered in postmodern narrative framework. She achieves this end by adopting and assimilating various post-modern tools. Its unpredictable, fractured temporality non conformity and playful idioms, are few subversive devices. Roy uses postmodern framework to undermine both Indian and British colonial society making it one of the most important works of postcolonial Indian fiction since Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. This revolutionary novel catapulted Roy into fame and infamy and has caused much controversy in the Indian subcontinent and beyond and has earned her threats. Though the novel on a whole is a tragedy, narration does end with a note of optimism, with the word tomorrow in both English and Malayalam.

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