

The God of small things

The God of Small Things is the debut novel of Indian writer Arundhati Roy. It is a story about the childhood experiences of fraternal twins whose lives are destroyed by the "Love Laws" that lay down "who should be loved, and how. And how much." The book explores how the small things affect people's behavior and their lives. The book also reflects its irony against casteism, which is a major discrimination that prevails in India. It won the Booker Prize in 1997.

The events of The God of Small Things are revealed in a fragmentary manner, mostly jumping back and forth between scenes in 1969 and 1993, with backstory scattered throughout. The story centers around the wealthy, land-owning, Syrian Christian Ipe family of Ayemenem, a town in Kerala, India. Most of the plot occurs in 1969, focusing on the seven-year-old twins Estha and Rahel, who live with their mother Ammu, their grandmother Mammachi, their uncle Chacko, and their great-aunt Baby Kochamma.

In the backstory before 1969, Mammachi was married to Pappachi, an Imperial Entomologist who beat her cruelly. By 1969 Pappachi is dead and Mammachi is blind. Behind her house is the Meenachal River and her pickle factory, Paradise Pickles & Preserves. Baby Kochamma is a bitter, jealous old woman who unrequitedly loved an Irish missionary. Chacko went to Oxford and married Margaret Kochamma, an English woman. They had a daughter, Sophie Mol, and then Margaret left Chacko for a man named Joe. Chacko returned to Ayemenem and took over the pickle factory. Ammu married Baba, trying to escape Ayemenem, but Baba turned out to be an abusive alcoholic. After the twins were born the two separated and Ammu moved back to Ayemenem. In the wider society of Kerala, the Communist Party is gaining power and threatens to overthrow landlords like the Ipes. The Ipes live near an Untouchable (an inferior caste) family that includes Velutha, a young man who works for Chacko and is beloved by the twins.

The main action centers around Sophie Mol's visit to Ayemenem. Joe dies in an accident, and Chacko invites Margaret Kochamma to Ayemenem for the holidays. Estha, Rahel, Ammu, Chacko, and Baby Kochamma make a trip to the airport, and on the way their car is trapped by a Communist march. The family then goes to see The Sound of Music, and Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, a vendor at the theater. The next day Sophie and Margaret arrive, and the family returns to Ayemenem.

Estha fears that the Orangedrink Man will come for him, so he and Rahel find a boat and row across the river to the "History House," the abandoned home of an Englishman who "went native." The twins set up a hideout there. Meanwhile Ammu dreams about Velutha, and that night she and Velutha meet by the river and have sex. They continue to meet every night for the next two weeks.

Finally Vellya Paapen (Velutha's father) comes to Mammachi and confesses his son's relationship with Ammu. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma lock Ammu in her room, where she screams that the twins are "millstones" around her neck. The twins decide to run away to the History House, and Sophie Mol comes with them. Their boat tips over as they cross the river

and Sophie Mol drowns. The twins reach shore and, terrified, fall asleep in the History House, unaware that Velutha is there too.

Baby Kochamma goes to the police, telling Inspector Thomas Mathew that Velutha tried to rape Ammu and kidnapped the children. Six policemen find Velutha and beat him brutally in front of Estha and Rahel. When Mathew finds out that Velutha is innocent, he threatens to charge Baby Kochamma. Terrified for herself, she convinces Estha to "save Ammu" by telling the police that Velutha killed Sophie Mol. Velutha dies in jail that night. After Sophie Mol's funeral Baby Kochamma convinces Chacko to throw Ammu out of the house, and Ammu is then forced to "return" Estha to Baba.

The twins are separated for twenty-three years, during which Estha stops speaking altogether. When he is thirty-one Baba "re-returns" him to Ayemenem. Meanwhile Rahel is kicked out of many schools, and Ammu dies when Rahel is eleven. Rahel marries an American and lives in Boston, but then gets divorced and returns to Ayemenem when she hears Estha is there.

The twins are reunited in 1993. Mammachi has died and Baby Kochamma and the cook, Kochu Maria, spend all day watching TV as the house falls apart. The History House has become a five-star hotel. Rahel and Estha (who still doesn't speak) sift through some old trinkets and notebooks and **end up reaffirming their closeness by having sex.**

Characters

Estha

Estha, which is short for Esthappen Yako, is Rahel's twin brother. He is a serious, intelligent, and somewhat nervous child who wears "beige and pointy shoes" and has an "Elvis puff". His experience of the circumstances surrounding Sophie's visit is somewhat more traumatic than Rahel's, beginning when he is sexually abused by a man at a theater. The narrator emphasizes that Estha's "Two Thoughts" in the pickle factory, stemming from this experience—that "Anything can happen to Anyone" and that "It's best to be prepared"—are critical in leading to his cousin's death.

Estha is the twin chosen by Baby Kochamma, because he is more "practical" and "responsible", to go into Velutha's cell at the end of the book and condemn him as his and Rahel's abductor. This trauma, in addition to the trauma of being shipped (or "Returned") to Calcutta to live with his father, contributes to Estha's becoming mute at some point in his childhood. He never goes to college and acquires a number of habits, such as wandering on very long walks and obsessively cleaning his clothes. He is so close to his sister that the narrator describes them as one person, despite having been separated for most of their lives. He is repeatedly referred to as "Silent".

Rahel

Rahel is the partial narrator of the story, and is Estha's younger sister by 18 minutes. As a girl of seven, her hair sits "on top of her head like a fountain" in a "Love-in-Tokyo" band, and she often wears red-tinted plastic sunglasses with yellow rims. An intelligent and straightforward person who has never felt socially comfortable, she is impulsive and wild, and it is implied that everyone but Velutha treats her as somehow lesser than her brother. In later life, she becomes something of a drifter; several times, the narrator refers to her "Emptiness". After the tragedy that forms the core of the story, she remains with her mother, later training as an architectural draftsman and engaging in a failed relationship with an American, elements of which parallel the author's own life story.

Ammu

Ammu is Rahel's and Estha's mother. She married their father (referred to as Baba) only to get away from her family. He was an alcoholic, and she divorced him when he started to be violent toward her and her children. She went back to Ayemenem, where people avoided her on the days when the radio played "her music" and she got a wild look in her eyes. When the twins are seven, she has an affair with Velutha. This relationship is one of the cataclysmic events in the novel. She is a strict mother, and her children worry about losing her love.

Velutha

Velutha is a Paravan, an Untouchable, who is exceptionally smart and works as a carpenter at the Ipe family's pickle factory. His name means white in Malayalam, because he is so dark. He returns to Ayemenem to help his father, Vellya Paapen, take care of his brother, who was paralyzed in an accident. He is an active member of the local Communist movement. Velutha is extremely kind to the twins, and has an affair with Ammu for which he is brutally punished.

Chacko

Chacko is Estha's and Rahel's maternal uncle. He is four years elder to Ammu.[1] He meets Margaret in his final year at Oxford and marries her afterward. They have a daughter, Sophie, whose death in Ayemenem is central to the story.

Baby Kochamma

Baby Kochamma is the twins' maternal great aunt. She is of petite build as a young woman but becomes enormously overweight, with "a mole on her neck", by the time of Sophie's death. She maintains an attitude of superiority because of her education as a garden designer in the United States and her burning, unrequited love for an Irish Catholic priest, her relationship with whom is the only meaningful event in her life. Her own emptiness and failure spark bitter spite for her sister's children, further driven by her prudish code of conventional values. Her spite ultimately

condemns the twins, the lovers, and herself to a lifetime of misery.

Themes

Family and Social Obligation

The God of Small Things basically deals with the complicated relationships between members of the Ipe family in Ayemenem, India. Each family member has different factors weighing on their relationships, like social obligation, familial duty, and personal dislike. Baby Kochamma, one of the book's most negative characters, allows her personal grudges and preoccupation with society's approval to lead her to betray her own family. Outside of the Ipes, Vellya Paapen also chooses his duty to society over familial love when he offers to kill his son, the Untouchable Velutha, for sleeping with Ammu. It is this tension between internal love and social obligations that makes up most of the novel's conflict.

The most important relationship of the book is between the twins Estha and Rahel and their mother, Ammu. The twins see themselves as almost one person, and their closeness is a shelter from the harsh political and social forces of their world. The twins' relationship with Ammu is also very complex, as Ammu is both a loving mother and an unpredictable woman who sometimes says and does things that hurt her children deeply. The very existence of the twins in her current state of divorce is also a disgrace for Ammu in Indian society. Mammachi deals with social and personal issues with her children as well, as she loves Chacko with a repressed sexuality and forgives his affairs, but disowns Ammu when Ammu sleeps with an Untouchable. Familial love is always struggling with society and duty in the novel, and it is rarely victorious.

Indian Politics, Society, and Class

The members of the Ipe family deal with a variety of social and political influences that cause much internal and external struggle in the novel. In the larger society of Kerala, India (in the 1969 portion of the novel), Marxist ideas have taken root and begin to upset the class system of landlords and laborers. This directly affects Paradise Pickles and the characters of Velutha, Chacko, and Comrade Pillai. The ancient Hindu caste system is another important factor – this system was officially abolished years earlier, but it still remains strongly imprinted on the minds of the public. The "Love Laws" of the caste system are of particular significance, particularly the divide between Touchables and Untouchables (a caste seen as vastly inferior).

Most of the Ipe family is also "Syrian Christian," and Mammachi and Baby Kochamma in particular use their faith to justify many of their actions. Estha and Rahel, who are half-Hindu, half-Syrian Christian, must then struggle with this conflicting identity. The gender double standard of Indian society is another large factor in the plot, as Pappachi and Chacko's sins are generally overlooked, while Ammu is disgraced and scorned for being divorced. Overall, the "small things" that occur between the characters of the novel serve as a microcosm for the "big things" happening throughout India, as many political and social forces struggle against each

other and the country leans towards violence and unrest.

Love and Sexuality

Love comes in many forms in *The God of Small Things*, but it is most important when it crosses divides of society and duty. The relationship between Estha and Rahel is the strongest of the book, as the two are so close as to almost consider themselves one person. Yet when the young Rahel lists the people she loves she does not include Estha, but instead those she is “supposed” to love according to familial duty. Roy emphasizes the “Love Laws” early and often, foreshadowing the importance she will give to love that crosses boundaries of society and tradition. The central example of this is Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, an Untouchable. This relationship is horrifying to the community and leads to Velutha’s death and Ammu’s exile, but it is also the most positive example of romantic love in the novel.

Unfortunately, love and sexuality often take on more violent and oppressive forms, as Mammachi is beaten by her husband and Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. Roy ends the novel with Estha and Rahel’s incestuous union after they are reunited, followed by Ammu’s first sexual encounter with Velutha. The poetic descriptions and juxtaposition of these scenes against violence and death gives them greater impact, and through them Roy shows that love can cross divides of politics and hatred. Even though such love can lead to tragedy, it is still incredibly valuable.

Change vs. Preservation

Many characters try to preserve old memories and traditions in the novel, but Roy also portrays the inevitable march of change through small shifts in the status quo. *Paradise Pickles & Preserves* is the most obvious symbol of preservation (pickling things to preserve them), as Mammachi and the people of Ayemenem cling to the old caste system and the gender double standard. In places like Mammachi’s house and the “History House” things linger from the past and are nursed and kept alive, like the “Loss of Sophie Mol” or the ghost of Kari Saipu. Other than through its name, the History House also becomes a symbol of preservation as the resting place of Rahel’s plastic watch with the time painted on it – a small example of literally freezing time.

Despite these attempts at preservation, the pickle jars keep leaking, and one of the book’s common refrains is “things can change in a day.” Much of the action takes place in two days, one in 1969 and one in 1993 – the days of Sophie Mol’s death and Rahel’s reunion with Estha. The efforts to preserve tradition are eroded away, and change still comes to both characters and country through the “small things.” Ammu gets divorced and then loves an Untouchable, defying gender roles and the caste system, and the Marxist movement gains power and overturns the system of landlords and laborers. Small things like Ammu’s warning that she loves Rahel “a little less” lead to big events like Rahel and Estha running away, which in turn leads to Sophie Mol’s death.

Small Things

In both the novel's title and in her writing style, Roy emphasizes the small moments, objects, and changes that symbolize and lead to the "Big Things" in life, like death, love, and political upheaval. Much of *The God of Small Things* is written in a kind of free indirect discourse, a style where the third-person narrator partly perceives the world in the childlike way that young Estha and Rahel do. This leads to many words written oddly (like "Bar Nowl" or "Locusts Stand I") but also to an emphasis on the innocent way a child sees the world, focusing on certain images and words. Through this lens, Roy dwells on small things like Rahel's watch, Estha's "Two Thoughts," and the little Marxist flag instead of straightforwardly describing the plot of the story.

Within the narrative itself, Roy often points out that small talk is a mask for large, hidden feelings. The most important example of this is in Ammu and Velusha's relationship at the end of the book. Instead of speaking of the huge taboo they are breaking or the impossibility of their future, the two lovers focus on the bugs in the jungle around them and look no farther than "tomorrow." While the "Big Things" eventually reveal themselves, it is the small things of the novel that make the story so poignant and human, and Roy's writing style so intimate.

