THE DYNAMICS OF LANGUAGE IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract

‘The God of Small Things’ is a literary masterpiece by Arundhati Roy that highlights the unconventional style of writing with a gamut of literary techniques employed using the non-sequential narrative and a meticulous use of dialect that serves to highlight the differences present between the various social groups of Kerala primarily in the 1960s. There are notable features in the novel that includes the use of non-standard English, which highlights dialect, and variations in syntax and word choice which represents the cultural and linguistic diversity of India in the characters and setting of the novel. There are numerous and detailed picturesque descriptions of the environment presented through a variety of language techniques in the novel which is truly the soul of the novel and also brings out distinctly the intertwined social and cultural setting of the life in India while exploring the themes of caste, love and power.

Key words: Indian English, culture, dialect, unconventional, misspellings, colonial

The God of Small Things (1997) revolves primarily around the incidents which are set from 1969 and 1993 in a small town Ayemenem in Kerala. The story revolves around a wealthy Syrian Christian family and primarily is a story about the childhood experiences of fraternal twins. Most of the story’s plot is set in 1969. The pivotal characters in the story include the two twins Esthappen Yakako Ipe (Estha) and Rahel Ipe who live with their mother Ammu, uncle Chacko, grandmother Mammachi and great-aunt Baby Kochamma. The author, Arundhati Roy has highlighted the political and social issues as ‘literature, history and culture are the inseparable elements’ (SPP 3376) and are prevalent in the Indian society which she has depicted through her story. She has knitted together diverse aspects related to caste, culture, hierarchies, love and prejudice against women. The novel has been critically acclaimed for its poignant and reminiscent portrayal of themes that are highly complex in nature that primarily highlight love, deprivation, and identity.

Sekher states “The God of Small Things attempts to subvert patriarchic norms that sustain caste and gender domination by its use of subversive comparisons and analogies, ancient hierarchies that sustain the caste and the gender question still remain assertive, unresolved even by the healing and redeeming powers of fiction” (3445). Casey highlights that “While caste, geopolitical inequities, and gendered social norms are all important components of The God of Small Things, the novel’s feminist legal critique not only is perceptive and timely but also offers a crucial insight into the political interventions of the novel’s aesthetic form” (382).

In addition to the thematic elements, many critics have applauded and critiqued Roy’s dynamics of language usage in her debut novel. She has used a narrative which is not sequential in nature and has used flashbacks to present her story. Mannan assesses that she has put “ Unconventional time-shifts, elliptical, chronological sequence and circuitous narrative lend the story of the novel, The God of Small Things, a rare sparkle” (Preface).
Roy through her words paints vivid and detailed pictures of the surroundings in the novel. In the opening lines of Chapter 1 (Paradise Pickles & Preserves), she states:

“May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun” (1).

Her style of sketching a detailed picture about the environment at the very onset of every chapter makes her writing highly picturesque. In every chapter, Roy delineates about the setting of the surroundings which sets an altogether different pace for readers.

“Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of salt water from the backwaters that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river” (124).

Another noticeable thing which Roy has used in the novel is the use of Capitalisation to emphasize on specific words throughout the novel such as “BE INDIAN BUY INDIAN” (58), “Doctor is IN Doctor is OUT” (132). Her choice of using certain grammar patterns has been well thought-out that brings up an imagery that she wants to create in the mind of her readers. For example “Big Man the Lantern. Small man the Tallow-stick” (89).

Majority part of her book’s story is seen through the eyes of the children who further makes the description of people, events and places quitechildishly natural.

Though many critics have written about Roy’s deliberate use of a narrative technique that violates English grammar rules in the novel but the fact remains that her style of writing is quite unusual from other authors who generally represent childlike characters with simple sentences and vocabulary. Few instances where the Indianised form of English by children can be noticed in the novel are seen in expressions such as “the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man” (101) and “Whatisyourname?” (127). Instances in the novel where no space is given between the words very clearly represent the Indianised version of English language. The children speaking the English language without any gap in between words, clearly demarcates the difference that Arundhati Roy has knowingly highlighted throughout the novel creating a clear difference of the language from its colonised version.

Indian English has been used in the novel that truly represents a variety of the English language that is prevalent in India and incorporates the linguistic features of the Indian subcontinent. Roy has used syntactical structures and vocabulary that is idiomatic in nature that are understood easily by a native Indian speaker of English Language. Roy has used Indian English to convey the cultural and social context of the story that is set in Kerala, an Indian state.

In addition to the usage of ‘Indianised’ form of English, there are notable instances in the novel where language choices have been made intentionally by the author that supports in the unfolding of the plot in the story that represents the local environment of Kerala. To illustrate pronouncing words in the colonial version of English language which is considered as the “correct way” has been stressed through different characters in the novel especially by Baby Kochamma and Sophie Mol.

“That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins’ private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines— ‘impositions’ she called them— I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English.” (36).

In another instance, when Sophie Mol corrects Estha while calling her for dinner, “Then it was time for dinner. ‘Supper, silly,’ Sophie Mol said when Estha was sent to call her.” (329).
The absurdity of speaking the “correct English” typically in the novel also highlights that it was believed in Kerala in the 1960s, that only the elite of the society could speak in the actual form of British English which is quite true even today as a current Indian social practise. Throughout the story, it is found that the protagonists struggle to speak in the correct form of English, thereby creating instances which allows the author to experiment with the descriptions of the scenes, characters and certain examples that can be only viewed from a children’s eye and are grammatically incorrect.

It is quite noticeable that Roy very clearly mocks in different ways the race to achieve the “correct English” by the Indians and especially the characters in her story that symbolically stresses upon the sufferings of the Indian people who kept struggling to match up the exact pronunciation of English words. Speaking in English also encouraged the thought process of being more elite than the others. Certain characters in the novel such as Baby Kochamma speak a mixture of English and Hindi which reflected her as a member of the elite who got an opportunity to be educated in English. This represents the cultural divide between the ones who could speak in English and the ones who could not. It also resulted in people asserting power and dominance on others who could not speak in English. Indians who spoke in English considered themselves superior than others and the same is true even today. There are notable techniques used throughout the book that reflect the cultural and social divides within the society in the Indian Sub-continent.

Roy has stressed upon the admiration for English language among her characters in her novel time and again in the story. She has also brought to notice that it was and still remains strange to see that undermining one’s own mother tongue was considered normal. That’s the impact of the colonial power in the Indian sub-continent.

“The other swinging like a soldier’s (lef, lef, lefrightleft).” (141).

Another striking technique used in the The God of Small Things is the use of dialect that serves to highlight the differences between the various social groups within the novel. If we pay attention to the character Velutha, who is a part of the ‘Paravan’ community in Kerala that is considered as a low-caste, speaks in a distinctive dialect that mirrors his lower-caste status. In comparison to Velutha, the character of Ammu speaks in a manner that is considered more polished and educated which truly represents and reflects her upper-class background. This depiction of disparity of dialect through her characters, let’s Roy highlight the polarity present in the social pyramid of the 1960s of Kerala. Also, the use of dialect stresses the ways in which the characters in the novel seem repressed by their place within it.

Miss-spellings is another highlight or strategy used by Roy to truly depict the pronunciation in the Indianised way and her revolt against the undue pressure faced in the Indian Sub-continent for learning English. Words such as America has been misspelled as “Amayrica” (Roy 129), Minute as “Mint” (134), Knickers as “gnickers” (156), ‘Thank God’ as “Thang God” (154) and always have been miss-spelled as “Orlways” (154). There are several such examples throughout the novel.

In addition to this, a very unique of representing the revolt against the usage of the correct form of English is by the use of reversal of letters of a word in the story.

“Estha read aloud from the board on the wall.

‘ssenetiloP,’ he said. ‘ssenetiloP. ecneidebO.’

‘ytlayO, ecneggilletnI,’ Rahel said.

‘ysetruOÇ.’

‘ycnieicifE’ ”(313).

Another key element used by Roy is the use of rhyming lines every now and then in the story.

“There was

A girl,
Tall and
Thin and
Fair

Her hair
Her hair
Was the delicate colour
Gin-nger (left, right)
There was
A girl—” (141)

The use of adjectives by an author certainly enhances the description of characters, incidents and setting in a story. It provides more freedom to an author to provide a very specific and detailed account about the information which he or she wants to elucidate in a piece of writing. Many authors have used adjectives in their works to reach out to its audience in a way which seems that the reader is not reading those descriptions but actually experiencing it personally.

The use of adjectives can be found in abundance in Roy’s novel. “hot, brooding month” “black” crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees.” (1).

Other than this, certain autobiographical elements can also be seen in the novel such as the place Ayemenem where the novel is set is connected to Roy’s own childhood and her growing up in Kerala’s Syrian Christian community. The central characters in the novel are also from a Syrian Christian family. The manner in which Roy creates a picturesque descriptions throughout the novel truly reflects the influence of her childhood days in her debut novel.

To conclude, it can be said that Roy has employed a plethora of language techniques throughout the novel which is a true delight for an Indian reader especially and non-Indians readers too. A non-Indian reader needs to have a thorough knowledge of the idiomatic Indian English along with the cultural awareness of the 1960s Kerala. She has used a series of language techniques such as use of Capitalisation, misspellings, reversal of letters of a word, grammatical errors as per ‘colonised English version’ of English, to abundant use of adjectives to display emphasis, using non sequential narrative to sketch detailed picturesque description of the environmental settings and keeping the ‘Indianised’ version of expressions and syntactical structures. Roy has shaped the language of the novel that truly represents the Indian culture. Overall, it is a great exploration of language techniques which makes the reading of the novel a rich experience.

References: