

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Arundhati Roy

(1997)

Story

This rambling, Book Prize-winning debut novel by Arundhati Roy is set mainly in the fictional village of Ayemenem in Kerala, in southwest India. It reflects the political realities of the time (when Kerala was ruled by a Communist party), but it focuses on the drama within a single family, an upper-class Syrian Christian family. The action frequently alternates between the present in 1993 and the past in 1969. Despite the somewhat confusing narrative, with several main characters, the story is tied together by the lives of the twins, Rahel (a girl) and Estha (a boy), who are seven when the story begins and 31 when it concludes.

The twins' eventual mother, Ammu Ipe, was young when she escaped from her abusive father and went to spend a summer with an aunt in distant Calcutta. There she married a man, who also turned out to be an alcoholic. When her children, Rahel and Estha are born, she leaves him and returns to Kerala. Back home, her uncle, Chacko, has just returned from England following a disastrous marriage to Margaret, an English woman. Also in the household is Baby Kochamma, an irascible grand aunt, who had converted to Catholicism as a young woman because she fell in love with a Catholic priest. Another arrival in the village is Margaret (Chacko's ex-wife) and her daughter, Sophie, who have been invited by Chacko out of sympathy for her at the death of Margaret's second husband.

Three dramatic events drive forward the story, although they are narrated in retrospect. First, Estha is sexually attacked by a man who sells drinks in a movie theatre. Rahel knows what happened, but no one else does. Then Ammu begins a love affair with Velutha, an Untouchable who works as a servant in the family's pickle factory. He is also a communist, which was a mainstream party in Kerala at the time, although to the family it makes him more dangerous.

When this scandalous liaison is discovered, Velutha is sent away and Ammu is locked in her room. When Ammu (unfairly) blames her children for revealing the truth about her affair, they run away and take Sophie, their cousin, with them. But Sophie dies in the attempt. Her death is the third key event. When Baby Kochamma tells the police that Velutha is responsible for her death, he is hunted down and beaten. The twins tell the Chief of Police what really happened, but he suppresses the truth, for fear that it might cause unrest among the Communist supporters (who are numerous in the area). When Baby Kochamma is threatened with punishment for lying to the police, she saves herself by convincing the twins to change their story. Meanwhile, Velutha dies of the injuries suffered from the police beating. After Sophie's funeral, Ammu finally tells the police about her relationship with Velutha. Again, Baby Kochamma manages to persuade Chacko that Ammu and her children caused Sophie's death. Ammu is thrown out of the house and Estha is sent away to live with her father. Rahel marries and emigrates to America, where she divorces and then returns to the village, in 1969, where she is reunited with Estha. The novel ends with the twins having sex and a retelling of the love affair between their mother and Velutha.

Themes

Love The great driving force of this ambitious and moving novel is love, in all its various forms. There is the unrequited love of Baby Kochamma for a Catholic priest, a thwarted desire that twists her into perpetual frustration and ultimately ruins the lives of others. There is also the enduring maternal love of Ammu for her two children, Rahel and Estha, and her love affair with Velutha, which is the core event of this long story. And then there is the concluding scene, in which the twins themselves make love. That very deliberate final, almost shocking action would appear to be the author's

comment on human affairs in general. There are three examples of a very passionate and genuine love: 1) Baby Kochamma for the priest; 2) Ammu and Velutha; and 3) Rahel and Estha. All three are forbidden by social convention, for reasons of class, caste or kinship. There are also three normative relationships, marriages between a man and woman: Ammu and Baba, Chacko and Margaret, Rahel and her husband. All three are failures. In two the husband is an abuse drunkard, and in the third there is emotional aridity. But it is the scandalous love of Ammu and Velutha that is at the core of the story. Velutha is a Paravan, the lowest of the low, whose ancestors actually had to crawl backwards and sweep away their footprints when they crossed paths with an upper-caste man. Velutha not only transgresses that rule with his political activism, he also crosses the more explosive sexual boundary by loving Ammu. Of all the relationships in the story, theirs is the deepest, the one in which two people really merge, body and mind, into one being. And it is for that blurring an arbitrary line between people that Velutha is killed.

Secrets Many things are concealed in the story, in the village, in the pickle factory, in the movie theatre and within the large extended family of the Ipes. One of the most memorable images occurs in the very beginning, when Rahel imagines a painter falling from his scaffolding, his 'blood spilling from his skull like a secret.' Blood and secrets are then woven together throughout the story. There are events and thoughts that must be hidden. Baby Kochamma's infatuation with a priest remains underground, as does Estha's sexual molestation by a man in a movie theatre. Also covered up, though not for long, is Velutha's political activism, which if known would have had him fired. The illicit sexual affair between Ammu and Velutha is, of course, a sensational secret, but the hushed-up circumstances surrounding Sophie's death are more consequential. We know that she died by accident, falling from a boat and drowning in a river, but that truth becomes the family's skeleton in the closet and leads to terrible events. Baby Kochamma lies to the police, blaming Velutha for the death. As a result, Velutha is beaten and later dies of his injuries. That horrible violence is secretly witnessed by the twins, who are hiding in a ruined house, which adds another veil of mystery to the incident. And, finally, even when Ammu tells the full truth to the Chief of Police, he suppresses it for fear that it will cause a scandal.

Cultural Identity In an interview, the author revealed that one of her reasons for writing the book was the rich diversity of cultures in her own childhood memories of growing up in a Syrian Christian family in Kerala. The region where she was born and where the novel is set, Kottayam District, is notable for its prominent Syrian Christianity, rubbing along with Hindus, Muslims and Catholics, without much friction. Syrian Christians are among the best-educated communities in India, and it seems significant that many of the characters in the novel are western-educated. Chacko, Baby Kochamma and Rahel all go to either the UK or the US at some point for studying or training. Even more important, none of them becomes 'westernised' or wants to lose their cultural identity, as is the case in several well-known Indian novels. On the contrary, the Ipe family is proud of its legacy. At one point, Ammu insults her father by calling him a 'shit-wiper' for his slavish imitation of the British. On the other side of the cultural divide, Chacko suffers from racial discrimination aimed at him by his English in-laws, who are shocked that their daughter (Sophie) would marry an Indian, no matter how 'educated.' Sophie herself is not untainted by these attitudes and refers to herself as 'half-wog' and to Rahel and Estha as whole 'wogs' ('white oriental gentleman', a racial slur, regardless of gender). The need for a strong cultural identity is also illustrated by the unease that Rahel and Estha feel at being the children of a Hindu father and a Syrian Christian mother. There is even discomfort when Baby Kochamma converts from Syrian Christianity to Catholicism in order to attract the attention of her love interest, a Catholic priest.

Characters

Estha Estha, the twin brother of Rahel, who is the favoured child, although he suffers sexual abuse in his childhood, which scars his relationships with women.

Rahel Rahel, his twin sister, is also a narrator of part of the story. She is often considered the lesser of the two, due to gender bias, but she is the one who escapes to America, at least, temporarily.

Ammu Ammu is the mother of these twins, who herself escapes from her own parents and ends up marrying an alcoholic and violent man (called Baba). It is her love affair with Velutha, an Untouchable, that sparks the drama and tragedy described in the novel.

Sophie Sophie is the daughter of Chacko and Margaret. Her accident death by drowning sets off a chain of accusations, lies and revelations that help shape the story.

Velutha Velutha is an Untouchable man who works as a servant and carpenter in the family's pickle factory. An intelligent man, he is also an active member of the Communist Party (the Marxist branch). He is killed by the police for daring to have sexual relations with an upper-caste woman (Ammu).

Chacko Chacko is Ammu's older brother, who goes to England for higher education and marries Margaret. They divorce and he returns to the village, bringing Sophie, their daughter, with him. Sophie's mysterious death is a significant event in the story.

Baby Kochamma Baby Kochamma, probably the least likable of all the characters, is the twins' maternal great aunt. Eccentric and lonely, she is responsible, by her deceit, for most of the suffering in the story.

Baby Kochamma (Vindictive)

Character Baby Kochamma is not a baby (she's an elderly lady), but she sometimes acts like one. She is spiteful, destructive, and extremely self-centred. Her desire for revenge and punishment is the force behind much of the plot, and her disdain for others causes her to manipulate them (including Chacko, Estha, Rahel and even the Chief of Police). She ridicules Ammu for being divorced, for having married a Hindu and for having married him for love. She insults the twins for not really having a father (after the divorce). She lies to the police, a decision that ultimately leads to Ammu's lonely death in a cheap hotel. At one point, she is described as a 'Karma Houdini,' meaning that she has never been punished for her past evil deeds and thoughts. But that description is not entirely accurate, for Baby Kochamma is a tragic figure. Her entire life seems to have been shaped by the failure to marry a Catholic priest when she was young. She even converted to Catholicism and became a nun in the hopes that she would become close to him. Desperately unhappy and lonely, she was rescued from the nunnery by her father, who then sent her away to America, where she studied landscape architecture. She never marries and constantly harps away at those who attempt to build a happy life for themselves. Baby Kochamma was herself a little bit of a rebel when she was young, arguing against the evils of materialism, but in her later decade she becomes an ardent consumer of all modern things, most especially her beloved television. Physically, she is described as being 'petite' but later becomes extremely large, 'with an ugly mole on her neck,' as if this indelible mark is a symbol of her internal wickedness.

Activities Previously, while in a convent after converting to Catholicism (in order to attract the romantic attentions of a priest), she used to read the Bible and look very pious as she walked among the cloisters, praying and fingering her beads. When she returned to her village, she used to wander about her garden in a sari and gumboots, wielding an enormous pair of shears and orange gloves. At night she tried to fight back age with face creams. Now, in the present day, she has abandoned the garden and watches television all the time, her favourite programmes being American basketball and one-day cricket.

Illustrative moments

Romantic Although Baby Kochamma, in the present-day sections of the narrative, is a thoroughly detestable person, we see a softer side in her backstory. When she was eighteen, she fell in love with an Irish priest, who practiced in Madras but 'was sent to Kerala to learn 'about Hindu scriptures so he could denounce them more intelligently.' Baby Kochamma is smitten by Father Mulligan and tries to seduce him by waylaying him as he approached their house on Thursday afternoons when he had discussions with Baby Kochamma's father (who was a reverend in the Syrian Christian church). As the unsuspecting Father approaches, Baby Kochamma demonstrates her self-sacrificing charity by bathing a poor and dirty heathen boy in the family's garden well. Father Mulligan replies to her

greeting and then she asks him a convoluted theological question, which she had spent an hour preparing, just so that she could look at him while he was forced to look at her. This moment of girlish innocence, of course, is not as innocent as it appears. It is entirely a fabrication, devised by Baby Kochamma to manipulate another's feelings. It fails, but at the same time it reveals the deeper deceptive layers of her personality.

Vindictive The vilest among Baby Kochamma's detestable attributes is her vindictiveness. This quality permeates the novel, ruining more than one life, especially Ammu's, whom she hates for being a divorced mother, a woman who married out of love and married across religious communities. But it is also the motive for her massive lies to the police about Sophie's death. She falsely accuses Velutha of murdering her simply because he has humiliated her years earlier. In the key scene, Baby Kochamma and others are travelling in a car through a crowded street when they are stopped by a large crowd. Soon, it becomes clear that there is a protest march. The car is surrounded and Velutha opens the window and speaks to Baby Kochamma. He mocks her, using nicknames that suggest her wealth. Then, with the mob of protestors watching, he forces her (with threatening language) to wave the red flag of the Communist Party and to utter the rallying cry 'Freedom! Freedom.' Baby Kochamma is humiliated. As the author puts it, 'In the days that followed, Baby Kochamma focused all her public humiliation on Velutha. She sharpened it like a pencil.' She holds her anger for many years before unleashing it on Velutha with the false accusation that leads to his brutal murder at the hands of the police

Dishonest Baby Kochamma is also a practiced liar, a characteristic that she displays on several occasions. However, the most significant, in terms of its lasting consequences for many characters, is her falsification about Sophie's death. Sophie died after falling into the water when she, and Rahel and Estha, attempt to run away from their dysfunctional household. Baby Kochamma, however, tells the police that Velutha, a double outcaste as an Untouchable and a Communist activities, kidnapped the children, killed Sophie and raped Ammu. As a result of her false accusation, Velutha is hunted down and beaten by the police, and later dies of his injuries. When her false accusation is revealed and she is threatened with prison by perjury, she quickly frightens Rahel and Estha with stories that they and their mother, Ammu, will be arrested in connection with the death. Taking advantage of their love for their mother, she manipulates them and persuades them to corroborate her lies.

Rahel (Passive)

Character Rahel is the daughter of Ammu and the sister of Estha. She is also a partial narrator of the story, which is a hint that she is, in part, modelled on the author herself. (Certainly, many key elements of her life—going to architecture school in New Delhi and marrying someone she meets three—have parallels in Roy's personal life.) Rahel is a somewhat strange and fascinating character, always a little on the outside, never quite on the 'same page' as the other main characters. She is extremely quick witted, she is straightforward and unpretentious, and when she makes friends, she is very loyal. She is a watcher, who takes in everything, even if she cannot understand it, especially since a good deal of the action takes place when she is only seven years old. At one point, having observed her great aunt (Baby Kochamma) put on jewellery, she says to herself, 'She's living her life backwards,' which is a very perceptive comment. Her school reports consistently note two things: 1) she is an extremely polite child 2) she has no friends. Rahel drifts through life, floating from one experience to the next, without any direction or plan. She spends eight years at the architecture but does not finish the five-year course or earn a degree. As the author puts it, 'Other students were intimidated by her waywardness and fierce lack of ambition.' Because of her alienation from the normal, external world, she has a rich inner life, of imagination and possibly psychic powers. Her dark, secretive yet innocent point of view endows this excellent novel with much of its beauty and pathos.

Activities As a young child, Rahel loves to run wild in the banana groves around the family's pickle factory and to fly kites in the rice-fields (after harvest). She plays a lot with her brother, Estha, and with Velutha, the Untouchable servant with whom she forms a strong, non-verbal bond. Whenever she hears a word she didn't know, she goes home and looks it up in a dictionary. She always wears a watch, and looks at it many times each hour. During the eight years she spends at architectural school (without ever gaining a degree), she likes to make large charcoal drawings, with 'little or no artistic merit.' She also likes books, of all kinds, more to buy than to read, however. She works for a

few years in Boston, after her divorce, as a waitress, but hates it because she is propositioned and witnesses several murders.

Illustrative moments

Passive Unlike her pragmatic mother, Rahel is a 'drifter'. She is not guided by her father, who is absent in Calcutta, and has no one to provide a dowry and so no marriage proposals. She gets into architecture school in New Delhi only because she passed the exam, and not out of any interest or plan. The best example of her lack of a compass, however, is the most important decision of her life: to get married. As the author puts it, 'She drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts toward an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge.' She met her husband-to-be (an American) in architecture school, not because she was looking for a mate but because he saw her in a bookstore. When he invited her out for dinner, she saw no good reason to refuse—she was hungry and had little money—and so she drifted from one phase of courtship into another, never actually consenting nor refusing. As might be expected, after she moved to Boston with her husband, she drifted into a divorce, worked in several dead-end jobs and returned to Kerala.

Psychic Rahel is an unusual girl, who is said to have secrets, to have seen things and heard stories that perhaps she should not have. But she has. Or maybe, the author suggests, she is just an imaginative person. Or perhaps she has a sixth sense, a hyper sense of reality, that perceives what others cannot. A good illustration of this psychic power is the description of Sophie's funeral. Sophie, Rahel's nine-year-old cousin, has died from drowning, and Rahel, only seven, accompanies her mother and sister to the funeral. When she looks at the child-size coffin, she sees that Sophie is 'awake for her own funeral.' The dead girl shows her two things. One is the high, blue dome of the church, which she'd never looked at before. Rahel now looks and imagines a painter falling down from his scaffold, his body glistening like Velutha's body (the Untouchable whom she has witnessed being beaten by the police). She imagines him lying dead on the floor, 'dark blood spilling from his skull like a secret.' The second thing the dead girl showed her was a little bat, which lodged itself between the blouse and sari worn by Baby Kochamma, who was responsible for Velutha's death. She thinks that Sophie is still alive as her coffin is lowered into the grave, and says to herself, 'She [Sophie] was killed by the soft earth thudding on the pinewood lid.'

Unconventional Rahel's bizarre mental states are matched by her unconventional behaviour. She gets in trouble with the nuns at the convent on several occasions. Once they caught her outside the Headmistress' cottage decorating a knob of fresh cow dung with flowers. On another occasion, she was expelled for setting fire to the Headmistress's wig that she had stolen. But the most illuminating example of her strange behaviour and ideas is the third time she is disciplined at school. She is called into the Headmistress's office and confronted by accusations from 'senior girls' that she knocked into them in the corridors. 'And you did it on purpose,' the Headmistress says sternly. 'Why would you do a thing like that?' Rahel hangs her head, but after much coaxing 'to tell the truth,' she confesses that she did it in order 'to find out if breasts hurt.' Of course, 'breasts' don't exist in the convent, only 'chests' do, and the nuns are stunned into silence. Rahel is herself confused because she only told the truth.

Honest Candour is another one of Rahel's prominent characteristics, and it frequently lands her in trouble. A good illustration of that tendency is a scene when the family are driving in the Plymouth through a large town. When the car is surrounded by a mob of chanting Communist protestors, Ammu and Chacko (the uncle) make fun of the 'comrades,' but then one of them humiliates Baby Kochamma, forcing her (with threatening words) to wave a red flag and chant the slogans of the protestors. Rahel thinks it is Velutha, the servant at the family's pickle factory, but the others dismiss her suggestion—it would be too uncomfortable, too 'close to home.' A few minutes later, however, Rahel sees Velutha among the protestors and realises that it was him. 'Look, it's Velutha. It was him,' she says. Her mother slaps her and tells her to shut up. This is what is so confusing to the little girl: if she tells the truth, people get angry at her.

Ammu (Vulnerable)

Character Ammu is the mother of the twins, Rahel and Estha. Like many of the women in the story, she is strong-willed and suffers from the gender prejudice in Indian society. As a young person, she received only a high school education and was denied further education when her father moved the family from New Delhi back to the village in Kerala. He explained that 'college education for a girl was an unnecessary expense.' Later, she marries a man (known only as 'Baba') because she wants to escape from her dysfunctional family, but her husband turns out to be a violent alcoholic. She then retreats to the ancestral home in Kerala, where she has a passionate affair with Velutha, the Untouchable servant. Ammu is a mixture of the practical and the wild. On the one hand, she is a pragmatic, no-nonsense type of person, who looks after the family business in the pickle factory. On the other, she has an impulsive streak, which leads her into the illicit love affair. Above all else, however, she is the mother of the twins. Her love for them again is both cautious and impulsive. She is protective toward her children, perhaps overly protective, because she knows how vulnerable people are despite appearances. And sometimes her need for their love causes her to speak too harshly or too quickly. She also has a wicked sense of humour.

Activities Back in the Kerala village, Ammu works long hours in the family's pickle factory, supervising work and helping with accounts. At home, she loves to listen to her transistor radio playing the songs she remembers from her childhood. She smokes a lot of cigarettes and sometimes goes for a midnight swim. She also reads books to her two children, who like to hear her voice the characters in Kipling's *Jungle Book*. On weekends, she sometimes goes with the whole family to see 'The Sound of Music,' which is shown every Sunday evening in the local cinema.

Illustrative moments

Pragmatic Of all the many characters in this wonderful and weird book, Ammu is most practical. All her relatives across three generations are susceptible to flights of fantasy, fall victim to greed or are unable to resist temptation in the form of alcohol. She has a passionate side, as well, as shown by her love affair with Velutha, but that, too, was undertaken with caution and mutual understanding. However, the best example of her practical approach to life is her choice of a husband. Ammu has hatched a plan to escape her abusive father and suffering mother by visiting Calcutta and living with her aunt. While there, she meets a son of a wealthy landowner. 'He was small, but well built,' she says. 'Pleasant looking.' He has a sense of humour and, although not well-educated, is polite. Five days after Ammu meets him, she inveigles him to propose to her and she accepts. She doesn't pretend that she is in love with him—nothing is farther from her mind than that self-delusion. But she weighs up her options and decides that marrying an unknown man is better than returning to her unhappy parents' home in Kerala. That is a pragmatic decision but it isn't a wise one. Her husband turns out to be a liar and an alcoholic. For one full year, Ammu puts up with his behaviour and the sexual advances of his business colleagues before she leaves him and returns to Kerala, right back to where she had started. Except that now she had two children.

Guilt-ridden Ammu blames herself for the death of Velutha, the Untouchable man who is a servant in the family's business and a Communist agitator. Ammu, a divorced mother with two children, born into a high-status Christian family has a passionate love affair with this man at the bottom of the social hierarchy. She knows she has satisfied her own sexual desires, without due concern for how their illicit affair might affect Velutha, if it is revealed. When he is falsely accused of a murder and then killed, by the blows of a policeman's truncheon, she cannot hide from her guilt. The scene in which she learns of Velutha's death is poignant. She knows that he has been accused of the crime, and she goes to the police station, where he is held, in order to confess to her own 'crime' of their love affair and to explain how her aunt, Baby Kochamma, has wrongly named him as the murderer. However, when she arrives, hoping to see him, he is already dead. The pompous Chief of Police insults her, calling her a 'whore' and her children illegitimate. Then she cried. 'She wasn't sobbing, but the tears welled up and ran down her cheeks. Her children had never seen her cry before, and it frightened them.' She boards a bus with her children, to return home. But when the bus conductor asks, 'Where to?' she can only say, 'I've killed him.'

Vulnerable The maternal love that Ammu feels for her children is extreme. She is overprotective, worrying about them all the time, and anxious that they will draw away from her. Her love for them

renders her vulnerable. That fragility is demonstrated in a scene when the family are leaving a cinema after seeing 'The Sound of Music' (for the seventh time). Unbeknownst to Ammu, the soft drinks vendor has sexually molested Estha, her son, during the show. As they leave the lobby, Ammu makes a casual comment: 'That drinks man is a sweet chap.' Rahel, who knows what he has done to her brother, snaps, 'Why don't you marry him then?' Ammu is shocked and explains that unkind words, such as that make people love you less. Rahel is contrite but confused because she meant no harm. Now, Ammu realises she herself has spoken too harshly and that Rahel, her daughter, will love her a little less. It is a quick exchange, but it illustrates the knife-edge that Ammu feels she stands on in terms of affection for and from her children. She wants to teach them, and to discipline them, because she loves them, but she realises that each time she speaks harshly she forfeits some of their affection.