

## **The God of Small Things: A Play-Field of Linguistic Innovations.**

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Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* brings a major breakthrough in the conventional way of writing. The book is a satire on politics, public administration; it is a protest novel which is radical, subversive and taboo-breaking. What is perhaps most interesting about the novel is its linguistic innovations. Roy here writes in a style, which is markedly different from the one, used by other Indian novelists writing in English. Roy breaks and subverts the accepted and so-called standard conventions of the language.

Language which is used as a means of communication indicates the pattern of thought and idea in a work of fiction. Roy does the same thing what R.K. Narayan says:

..... the time has come for us to consider seriously the question of a Bharat brand of English. So far English has had a comparatively confined existence in our country chiefly in the halls of learning, justice, or administration. Now the time is ripe for it to come to the dusty street, market place, and under the banyan tree.<sup>1</sup>

Roy adopts the English language, and then appropriates it into Indian context. Her nativization of the language is important and essential because she needed such a variety of English to communicate to the world the culture she represents. 'Her stylistic innovations include use of words, phrases, and even sentences from the vernacular language, use of italics and upper case letters, subject-less sentences, faulty spellings, topicalization, deviation from normal word order, single word sentences, change of word classes, clustering of word classes, and a variety of other techniques.'<sup>2</sup>

Truly the stylistic and linguistic devices of the novel have created sharp reactions among the readers. And now I will discuss how the novel has become a play-field of linguistic innovations.

In the *God of Small Things*, Roy makes a sport with language. A linguistic investigation of the text shows that the treatment of the morphology and the syntax is original and creative. The language, she used, is more of a child's language. Words are freed from their traditional, recognized meanings or spellings. Roy appears to be perfectly at ease in her use of the language. She twists the language, moulds the speech-sound and the syntax to fit her requirements. It is through the eyes of the twins, Rahel and Estha, that the events are narrated. Naturally such a narrative becomes repetitive, slow and fragmentary as children in their immaturity do not always exercise control over their thoughts and imagination. However, this fragmented, unconventional language adds a charm and enhances the beauty of the speech.

Of the various stylistic innovations, the first thing, which strikes us, is Roy's use of Malayalam – the regional language of Kerala, which is her native state. In telling the story of *The God of Small Things* and other beings Roy actually tells the stories of her own children, her home and her meadows. The first native word i.e. Malayalam word, which Roy used in the novel, is *Veshyas*. When Ammu went to the Kottayam police station to inform the Inspector that there had been a mistake regarding Velutha, then Insepector Mathew told her that:

...the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from *Veshyas* or their illegitimate children. (Page-8)

Rev. Ipe, who is the great grandfather of Sophie Mol, was known as *Punnyan Kunju* (Page-23) which means 'Little Blessed One'. There is a phrase *Ruchi lokathinde Rajavu* (Page-46), which means 'Emperors of the Realm of Taste'. There are several other Malayalam words. For example : *Chhi-chhi poach* (Page-51) which means 'shit-wiper', '*mundu*' (Page-52) which means 'dhoti', *onner, runder, mooner* (Page-63) meaning one, two and three respectively. Roy also used Malayalam slogans in the novel. When Velutha is first introduced in the novel we see him, holding a red flag and with angry veins in his neck, is shouting the slogans for his right:

*Inquilab Zindabad!*

*Thozhilali Ekta Zindabad!* (Page-66)

We get several such other expressions in the novel. There are Malayalam folk songs in the novel. Lines like:

*Enda da Korangacha, Chandi ithra thenjadu?*

(Hey Mr. Monkey man, why's your bum so red?)

*Pandyill thooran poyappol nerakkamuthiri nerangi njan*

(I went for a shit to Madras, and scraped it till it bled.) (Page-196)

Again there is the chorus of the boatsong :

*Theeyome*

*Thithome*

*Tharaka*

*Thithome*

*Theem* (Page-197)

In chapter-I of the novel we see Ammu switches on her favourite tangerine transistor. It plays a song from a film called *Chemmeen* :

*Pandoru mukkuvan muthinu poyi*

(Once a fisherman went to sea)

*Padinjaran Kattathu mungi poyi,*

(The West Wind blew and swallowed his boat)

*Arayathi pennu pizhachu poyi,*

(His wife on the shore went astray) (Page : 219-220)

*Avaney Kadalamma Kondu poyi.*

(So Mother Ocean rose and took him away.)

Comrade Pillai generally talks in English but when he, in a confiding, conspiratorial voice advises Chacko, he also uses Malayalam language: *Oru Kaaryam parayattey?* (Page-277)

In another significant moment of the novel when Velutha is walking all alone in the road with Mammachi's spit in his face we hear the Malayalam words :

*Koo-koo Kookum theevandi*

*Kooki paadum theevandi*

*Rapakal odum theevandi*

*Thalannu nilkum theevandi* (Page-285)

Several other Malayalam words used in the novel are *Wrack* (Page-35), *Keto* (Page-277), *Enda* (Page-287), *Madiyo* and *Madiaayirikkum* (Page-310), *Naaley* (Page-340):

Another technique that Roy adopts in her novel is the use of italicized words, phrases and sentences. The first italicized word is used in page three of the novel:

She remembers the taste of the tomato sandwiches – *Estha's* sandwiches, that Estha ate ... (Page-3)

Rahel and Estha are monozygotic twins. Roy wants to tell us that Estha and Rahel are twins but with single identity by using the italic. In the same page the words 'them', 'they', 'they'd' are italicized to convey the same sense. In Sophie Mol's funeral, the priest's funeral song, the inscription on her tombstone : *A Sunbeam Lent To Us Too Briefly* (Page-7), Inspector Mathew's word-*Veshyas* (Page-8), his touching of Ammu's breasts with his baton, *Tap, tap* (Page-8) – all are written in italics. Roy actually used this technique to give emphasis, to make the words stand apart from the rest of the narrative, so that they can create a deep impression upon the mind of the reader.

Roy in *The God of Small Things* makes an extensive use of brackets. In page two of the novel Roy writes: She remembers, for instance (though she hadn't been there), what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man did to Estha in Abhilash Talkies. (Page: 2-3)

Again in page three there is a description of the bus journey when Ammu was pregnant : Estha and Rahel's father had to hold their mother's stomach (with them in it) to prevent it from wobbling (Page-3).

There are several other places where Roy uses brackets in the novel:

(Whom nobody recognized), (Page-4)

(a funeral junkie? a latent necrophiliac?) (Page-5)

(and Sophie Mol's) (Page-5)

(more or less) (Page-9)

(after the last time she came back to Ayemenem ..shouting) (Page-15)

FPO (Food Products Organization) (Page-30)

Roy makes an extensive use of brackets in the novel as a device to offer authorial comments and to provide necessary information to the readers.

Roy uses subjectless sentences in the novel. She even goes to the extent of using just one single word in the place of a complete sentence. She violates, subverts the regular grammatical order and takes the liberty in her use of language. Rahel never returned to Ayemenem when she was busy with her studies. Following this sentence there are sentences like 'not when Mammachi died' and 'Not when Chacko emigrated to Canada' (Page-18) – both the sentences do not have subjects. Examples of such other clipped sentences are :

- 1) Gate.  
Road.  
Stones.  
Sky.  
Rain. (Page-285)
- 2) Out.  
In.  
And lifted its legs.  
Up.  
Down. (Page-293)
- 3) **P**oliteness  
**O**bedience  
**L**oyalty  
**I**ntelligence  
**C**ourtesy  
**E**fficiency

The Kottayam Police. A Cartoonplatoon. New-Age princes in funny pointed helmets. Cardboard lined with cotton.

Hairoil stained...

Dark of Heart.

Deadlypurposed. (Page-304)

- 4) Huge ferns.  
A chameleon.  
A startling shoeflower. (Page-305)
- 5) *Quick Piss*  
*Hotfoam on warmstone. Police-piss.*  
*Drowned ants in yellow bubbly.*  
*Deep breaths.* (Page-307)
- 6) Click  
And click  
Below a Lucky Leaf. An autumn leaf at night. (Page-311)

The repetition of determiners also appears in several places of the novel. For example, there is a description:

One corner for cooking, one for clothes, one for bedding roles, one for dying in. (Page: 206-207)

In one place of the Chapter-14 we see there is a Marxist Party song whose theme is Unemployment. The chorus sings –

No vacancy! No Vacancy!  
*Wherever in the world a poor man goes,*  
No no no no no vacancy! (Page-269)

There is a long passage in the novel where ‘past’ the word, is repeated several times to bring effect :

Past floating yellow limes in brine...  
Past green mangoes, cut and stuffed with turmeric...  
Past glass casks of vinegar with corks...  
Past shelves of pectin and preservatives.  
Past trays of bitter gourd...  
Past gunny bags bulging with garlic...  
Past mounds of fresh green peppercorns  
Past a heap of banana peels...  
Past the label cupboard full of labels  
Past the glue.

Past the glue - brush.  
Past an iron tub...  
Past the lemon squash. (Page-193)

The repetition of the word 'past' here brings a tremendous effect on the narration.

Roy also uses words in a peculiar way. There are several occasions where we see words run into each other. Some of these are:

Yesyesyesyesyes (Page-86),  
'what is yourname?' (Page-127)  
'Okaythen' (Page-130),  
'flatfeet' (Page-139),  
finethankyou,(Page-145)  
'bluegrey blue-eyes' (Page-147),  
'mydearjudges' (Page-271),  
Cocalola Fantaiacecreamrosemilk (Page-301),  
Deadlypurposed (Page-304) etc.

Roy makes fun of the Indian pronunciation of English of which we get plenty of examples in the novel. When Rahel told Comrade Pillai that she was divorced, he pronounced the word as 'Die-vorced' (Page-130). The word 'pronunciation' to Baby Kochamma is, 'Prer NUN sea ayshun' (Page-154). Certain words are deliberately spelt wrong. 'America' is 'Amayrica' (Page-129), 'always' is 'Orlways' (Page-154), fatal is 'fatle' (Page-158), 'infinite' is 'infinnate' (Page-301), 'exactly' is 'eggzackly' (Page-324) etc.

Another important device is the reversal of the order of letters in certain words, phrases and sentences. At the Kottayam police station Estha had read aloud the words 'Politeness', 'Obedience', 'Loyalty', 'Intelligence', 'Courtesy' and 'Efficiency'. They appear as :  
ssenetiloP, ecneidebO, ytlayoL, ecnegilletnI, ysetruoC, yeneiciffE. (Page-313)

Besides, the novel is also characterized by the use of slang, extensive use of similies and metaphors, deliberate uses of clauses of concession etc.

Thus apart from its thematic perspective, the novel becomes unique once again from its linguistic perspective. Roy's use of words, phrases, and sentences of Malayalam is specially significant. She skillfully exploits the language. In her 'creative-play with words'<sup>3</sup> Roy breaks and even discards the conventional rules and makes anew for her own purpose. The linguistic experiments add a new dimension in the conventional way of writing and there lies the credit of Arundhati Roy.

#### **PRIMARY SOURCE**

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