The God of Small Things

Arundhati Roy
Biography

• Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born in 1961
• Grew up in Ayemenem in the state of Kerala, India
• Mother was a Syrian Christian and her father was a Bengali Hindu
• Roy said herself that Kerala was “home to four of the world’s greatest religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Marxism.”
Young Adulthood

- Parents divorced when she was young and her mother returned, unwanted, back to her parents home (like Ammu) and ran a school
- At sixteen she left home to live in a squatter’s camp in Delhi before taking an architecture apprenticeship at the New Delhi School of Architecture
- After earning an honors degree, she interned at the National Institute of Urban Affairs
Early Writing

• After school she took a small role in a movie directed by Pradeep Krishen, who she later married
• She took a scholarship to go to Italy to study the restoration of monuments
• She became a writer for film and then television
• Before writing this novel, she wrote several controversial articles about politics and Indian culture
Current Writing

• *The God of Small Things* was published in 1997 and won the Man Booker Prize the following year
• *GST* was her only novel
• Now focuses on nonfiction essays dealing with topics that affect impoverished people in India—starvation and malnourishment, dam construction, environmental destruction, and economic globalization.
• “The only thing worth globalizing is dissent.”
Setting

- Late 1960’s in Kerala which was in an uproar after Independence or Partition
- Occurred on August 15, 1947, when the British Raj became the two independent nations of India and Pakistan
- British separated the countries and states along religious lines, which has contributed to unrest and continuing trouble between provinces
Setting

• On June 25, 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency in India. He claimed that the end of the war with Pakistan justified it.

• Enabled the government to limit essential rights, censor the press, and arrest prominent political leaders.

• Meant to be a “national allegory” because of its exploration of the hybrid nature of India and its cultural origins.
Literary Movement

- Postcolonial literature (if you HAVE to classify it)
- Has some postmodern tendencies: anachronistic narrative collage, fragmentation of self, many different centers of truth for history
- Weaves between the past and present, focusing especially on the early 1990s and late 1960s, but including glances at other time periods as well
Style

• Lots of linguistic interplay: English is mixed with Malayalam words, the twins make up their own language and puns, neologisms (newly created words or expressions)
• Very rich in imagery and detail
• Some critics say the work was “overwritten”
Style

• Often breaks conventional rules of spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation.
• Uses sporadic capitalization and employs phonetics
• Inserts lists, catalogues, numerations, anagrams, puns, and palindromes throughout the novel
• Exchanges syllables between words, reads words backwards, and splits them apart
Literary Archeology

• Roy uses the novel to explore her country’s past at the same time that she explores her character’s history
• Digs through family and country history in order to reveal the patterns that those fragments suggest
• Roy described the twins as “two-egg fossils trapped in the bog of a story that was and wasn’t theirs”
Motifs

• Returns (Rahel’s, Estha’s, Ammu’s, Chacko’s, Baby Kochamma’s, etc.)

• Broken marriages (Mammachi and Pappachi, Ammu and Baba, Chacko and Margaret Kochamma, Rahel and Larry McCaslin)

• Power struggles and cultural and class tensions (“untouchables” and “touchables”, Communists vs landowners, sons vs fathers, lover against lover)
Motifs

• Memory and Identity
• Language and Play
• Love and Guilt
• Living on the fringes of society’s acceptance (no *locus standi* or as Rahel understands it, Locust Stand I)
Allusions and Intertextuality

• Alludes to classical and contemporary literature throughout
• Engages texts like *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Jungle Book*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sound of Music*, *Meet Me In St.Louis*, and more.
• Showing how these texts influence the interaction of political and popular culture across the world
• Able to expose and criticize Western cultural and economic power
Syrian Christianity

• Also known as St. Thomas Christians
• Different than Catholicism, but contain many similar theologies
• When the Catholic church attempted to bring them under their purview, the church fragmented into people for and against this move, and then continued to fragment from there
• Strong presence in Kerala and Kottayam
• Say the liturgy in Syriac, but speak Malayalam
Communism in India

• There are 6 recognized national parties in India and 47 state parties
• There are two different branches of Communist political parties in India: Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM
• CPM has its largest concentration in Kerala, the state in which our story takes place
• Currently has over a million members
• Before the Communist Party was split into two factions, they led armed rebellions in several different states before deciding to work through the parliamentary framework
CPM

- Created during the late 1960s during political turmoil
- Many of its leaders were jailed for agitations staged because of the food crisis and rising tram fees, which led to confrontations with police forces
- Only forms political alliances with left wing parties
- Heavily influenced by politics in both China and Russia
CPM

• In 1967, CPM won 19 seats in Congress with 6.2 million votes (only 4.28% of the national population)
• CPI won 23 seats with 5.11% of the national vote
• In Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodiripad created the United Front government which united all the Leftist parties together under one banner
• They hoped to address: food crisis, provide rehabilitation to refugees from Bangladesh, fighting corruption, nepotism, black-marketing, unemployment, food prices, women’s issues, caste systems, and reorganizing the police force to recognize democratic rights
Caste System

- Elaborate social hierarchy that stratifies people into social classes
- There are four main classes (varnas):
  - Brahmans: usually the priests or educated class
  - Kshatriyias: usually rulers, warriors, and property owners
  - Vaishyas: usually involved in commercial enterprises, like traders and merchants
  - Shudras: servile laborers
- Each of these classes is outlined in the Hindu holy text, the *Rig Veda*.
Untouchables

• The Vedas do NOT mention the Untouchables as part of the caste system; untouchability was created by society itself
• Jobs include tasks no one else wants and which make them “unclean”; garbage collecting, subsistence farming, removal of dead animals, rock hauling, cleaning latrines and sewage by hand; work under slave-like conditions or for less than $1 a day
• Historically not allowed into temples or into many public places
• In 1950 legislation was passed that forbid discrimination against the untouchables, but there is still clear stratification against them today
Untouchables

- Known today as Dalits
- More than 160 million people are considered untouchable in India today, 15 million of which are children
- Nearly 90% of all poor Indians and 95% of illiterate Indians are considered Dalits
- The strongest practice of this continuing prejudice is in the rural areas of the country
- Extremely impoverished and oppressed and entire families are often trapped in these cycles of poverty
Statistics compiled by India's National Crime Records Bureau indicate that in the year 2000, the last year for which figures are available, 25,455 crimes were committed against Dalits. Every hour two Dalits are assaulted; every day three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched. No one believes these numbers are anywhere close to the reality of crimes committed against Dalits. Because the police, village councils, and government officials often support the caste system, which is based on the religious teachings of Hinduism, many crimes go unreported due to fear of reprisal, intimidation by police, inability to pay bribes demanded by police, or simply the knowledge that the police will do nothing. "There have been large-scale abuses by the police, acting in collusion with upper castes, including raids, beatings in custody, failure to charge offenders or investigate reported crimes," said Narula. That same year, 68,160 complaints were filed against the police for activities ranging from murder, torture, and collusion in acts of atrocity, to refusal to file a complaint. Sixty two percent of the cases were dismissed as unsubstantiated; 26 police officers were convicted in court.