



# Basics of Nostalgia in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'

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The thoughts about the past are glorified over time because one's life is as if in a vacuum. Revisiting those places and meeting those people of your past bring about a flood of thoughts which we usually refer to as nostalgia. Nostalgia in literature is a rather complex feeling and it's a wonder how writers convey it through text. Nostalgic recollection serve as a bonding medium. The term is applied to indicate elements or factors that usually provoke both pleasure and sorrow. Places sometimes form a critical aspect of nostalgia in literature. *The God of Small Things* highlights the nostalgic recounting of Rahel's and Estha's childhood at Ayemenem their maternal home.

According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia in the twentieth century indicates, "a longing for continuity in a fragmented world", and at its worst, particularly for those who view nostalgia entirely in the negative sense, "it is an abduction of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure" (Boym xiv). Restorative nostalgia ignores and rejects "the signs of historical times-patina, ruins, cracks, imperfection (Boym, 45) "as it obsessively attempts to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps"(Boym, 141). As an antidote though not necessarily a cure to the totalizing impulses of restorative nostalgia, which "protects the absolute truth", Boym offers "the alternative of reflective nostalgia which calls into doubt". According to this the two might overlap in their frames of reference. Reflective nostalgia, it does not desire to rebuild the lost home but sets up a narrative that relishes distance, irony, fragmentation and inconclusive plots, "perpetually deferring homecoming itself". It recognizes that the "home is in ruins" and cannot be restored because it is now beyond recognition (Boym, 49-50). Reflective nostalgia acknowledges "the irrevocability of the past and human finitude". It does not reject the experience of displacement and exile but rather dwells

in longing and loss. Ethics of a reflective nostalgia is that it allows for an accounting of historical and individual memory within a unifying narrative of nationalist myths representing a collective “We”, a collective that does not represent the divergent and often suppressed narratives of a nation’s marginalized others.

The danger of nostalgia, especially when co-opted by nationalist ideologies is to tempt in to “relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding”, leading us ultimately “to confuse the actual home and the imagery one” – “In extreme cause it can create phantom homeland, for the sale of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters” (Boym, xvi). The emphasis of Boym's argument throughout her theoretical study, *The Future of Nostalgia*, is firmly placed on the need for a nostalgia that incorporates critical reflection of its own premises and fantasies an examination and acknowledgement of its precise history and contexts of longing. This presents us with a seeming paradox for by Boym's own definition, nostalgia is a form of longing that works tirelessly towards erasing history in favour of the fantasy of an elusive past that perhaps did not even exist (Boym, xvii-xiv). Moreover the reaction of those who are wholly averse to the prevalence of nostalgia in contemporary culture is to argue for eschewing it entirely. Boym on the other hand, argues that if nostalgia is “a symptom for our age, a historical emotion” (Boym, xvi), particularly when the modern experience is that of widespread Diaspora and exile then it is necessary to attempt a “creative rethinking of nostalgia not merely as an artistic device but as a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming” (Boym, xvii).

Defamiliarization, compels the reflective nostalgic “to narrative the relationship between past, present and future while acknowledging “the imperfect process of remembrance” (Boym, 41). There is no desire here to erase the gaps in knowledge, no compulsion to recover or return to an absolute point of origin to replace historical time with mythical time. Reflective nostalgia does not reject the experience of displacement and exile but rather, “dwells in...longing and loss”(Boym, 41) and not as a means for dwelling in and mourning over a past that no longer exists but with the understanding that the past is capable of “ inserting itself ” into the present to the point where “ the past opens up a multitude of potentialities , non-teleological possibilities of historic development ” (Boym , 50).Boym reminds us :

Re-flections suggest new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not a recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time. Reflective nostalgia reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as effective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection (Boym, 49-50)

Restorative nostalgia, a myth making most often found in nationalist revivals consist of only two main plots: the revisionist return to origins and conspiracy theories based on clear divisions between good and evil and “the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy” (Boym, 41 & 43). All ambivalence, complexity and specificity of both past and present circumstances are erased under the assertion that “Home” is always “under siege, requiring defense against the plotting enemy” who refuses homecoming and restoration of the imagined community, which did not comprise individual memories but a collective “we” (Boym, 43). Those who engage in this kind of nostalgia deny that it is nostalgia but rather about a truth – a truth that “manifests itself in total reconstruction of monument of the past”.

Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* illustrates both types of nostalgia, exposing the dangers of one situated alongside the critical and creative possibilities of the other. In its recognition of that compulsion towards nostalgia in the construction of both national and personal narratives of loss and displacement, the text seeks out an ethics of nostalgia that allows for a critical reflection upon the historical contexts and individual choices that inform the relationship between past and present. From the plot we basically get that the story is a nostalgic recounting by Estha and Rahel. It is said that nostalgia is bought about by a person, place or any kind of attachments. From the novel itself we can understand that how nostalgia is connected with a person. “It had been quiet in Estha's head until Rahel came. But with her she had bought the sound of passing trains and the light and shade that falls on you if you have a window seat. The world, locked out for years, suddenly flooded in, and now Estha couldn't hear himself for the noise” (Roy, 49). This passage shows the basic nostalgia which could be noted in the beginning of the novel.

The novel engages in a reflective nostalgia that performs a labour of grief through pondering pain that points to the future. The text mourns the loss of a nation that never existed because it failed to fulfill its promise. Its ethical longing for the failed promise of “Tomorrow” is located specifically in the shared desire of the transgressive lovers, Velutha and Ammu, as the narrative repeatedly circles back on that failure of

yesterday in order to explore and recover the narrative of the other to somewhere and how the promise of tomorrow should have been fulfilled. It is already said that reflective nostalgia is an aching about the loss. It is a densely fragmented narrative, which refuses to follow a clear linear time-frame or offer any “cut and dried moral distinctions”, since the ethical imperative for any writer who engages in a reflective nostalgia derives from “his or her willingness to take risks and reveal with honesty with regard to the past the ethical ambivalences and entanglements that any survivor of that system had to confront”. This kind of nostalgia could be noted in the experience of the twins itself due to the loss of their mother and each other. They are incapable of making sense of their history yet are compelled to do so when they return home as adults and perhaps to lay claim in whatever small way they can to that history, to take possession of their history as a means of reclaiming themselves. The actual possibility of their ability to do this however remains a tenuous hope, one that has perhaps already been foreclosed by the violence of the past which cannot be erased.

Reflective nostalgia is also noted when they recounts the loss of their cousin Sophie Mol which leads to a series of events. It is the death of Sophie Mol which brings about a twist to Estha’s and Rahel’s life, with this they lose their mother and Velutha, whom they blindly loved a lot. They remember the loss of their mother’s love which represents for the twins their only secure place of belonging in this world since they are marginalized by the rest of the family according to its own internalized stratifications of power based on who deserves to be loved and how much. Here both Rahel and Estha are in those wistful and yearning feelings while they are accepting that the past is the past. In reflective nostalgia, “its fears return with the same passion”.

The ethics of nostalgia in Roy’s novel revolves around the recovery of the repressed narrative of Ammu’s choice to disregard caste and sexual prohibitions in her affair with the untouchable, Velutha, both of them transgressing “the laws that lay down who should be loved and how much”; it is a choice that is a political as much as personal act of defiance and resistance against a social system that is founded on the repression of the marginalized other’s desire. Ammu’s choice ultimately disrupts the gendered and racial stratifications existing within her immediate family and the under community, prompting from them violent disciplinary reactions as a means of preserving their own integrity and power which of course has devastating consequences not only for Ammu but also the lives of her lover and her children. From the nostalgic recounting itself, we can understand that the novel tirelessly worries at problems of responsibility the

individual and the community is positioned within criss-crossing casual webs of transnational as well as national interrelationship which commit them to particular actions and choices.

Restorative nostalgia, in its denial of historical specificity, also seeks to deny responsibility for the past and by extension, the present; at the national level, this denial contributes to the romanticized narrative of the people as victims as exiles with the common goal of restoring the homeland: “it builds on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing” (Boym, 142). Restorative nostalgia’s re-scripting of the past also relies on a denial of displacement out of the need to establish the collective community’s integrity and superiority, especially on the national level, then this kind of myth-making inevitably leads to an endless re-apportioning of blame, creating enemies or scapegoats who deny the community either homecoming or wholeness. In the other words, the state denies past displacement while existing in the fear of future dispossession, thus articulating its power through a reactionary suppression of the threat of either foreign or internalized others. As *The God of Small Things* insistently reminds us, India’s colonial history of dispossession is the ghost haunting both the family and the nation and it is this specter of loss and displacement that is simultaneously denied and passed down from generation to generation.

The symbol of this history of dispossession is first represented by Pappachi’s moth, discovered by him but never named after him: “It’s pernicious ghost-grey, furry and with unusually dense dorsal tufts haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children’s children” (Boym, 49). It is also represented by the “History House”, the colonial past literally located on the “abandoned rubber estate” once owned by Karisaipu, an ‘Englishman who had gone native’. Ayemenem’s own Kurtz” (Roy, 52) and located more abstractly in Chacko’s history lesson given to the twins, in which he informs them “they were all Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away” (52). According to Chacko, the only way to understand their history is to go inside History House and listen to their ancestors. Yet because of the colonial past they are cut off from these voices: “When we try and listen all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by war...that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despises ourselves”. (Roy, 53)

Restorative nostalgia or the idea of homecoming is somewhat widely described in the chapter ‘God’s Own Country’. In this the problem with Chacko’s history lesson is that he ignores how he and others like him, those who belong to India’s ruling classes, contribute to this ongoing war. The twins of course do enter the History House and witness for themselves all too clearly that it “is not owed solely by the colonizers, the nation outside the nation ; it has also been built and occupied by the nation as it institutionalizes violence within its own borders”(Roy, 57). Chacko and Pappachi who never laid claim to his discovery partly because of his ‘Willingness to accept his powerlessness to challenge institutionalized rules view themselves as romanticized victims of their colonial heritage. At the same time due to the embedded oppressions of a patriarchal system, they wield a great deal of power over the women and children in their family. At one point, Ammu bitterly reminds Chacko of the reality that in ‘our wonderful male chauvinist society’, he has every right to claim as he does: “what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine”. Ammu, the twins, Velutha and even Mammachi and Baby Kochamma in spite of their complicities with that system of oppression are the truly dispossessed in this society.

Ammu and Velutha are the characters most vulnerable to their society’s strict adherence to cultural nostalgia. Ammu is keenly aware of the pressure she faces as a divorced woman with kids. This shows that Ammu had departed from the idyllic cultural path of marriage, kids and strict obedience to ones husband. She is labeled as an outcast of society. By immediately labeling her as an outcast for leaving an abusive relationship, shows that this society is one where a certain path, defined by old nostalgic views must be followed perfectly without deviations. The society presented in the novel is one in which those in power can revise history through nostalgia and sexual assault, not a topic to be brought up. Nostalgia not only affects Ammu and Velutha by casting them as outcasts, it also makes Baby Kochamma jealous of the efforts to rebel against the societal norms made by them. The narrator also emphasizes the point that culture is stuck in pre-modern philosophy by showing many serious issues which are swept under the ring in order to maintain the social structure.

The text mourns the children’s loss of innocence. It also recognizes that the innocence of the historical past is an illusion because it never, in fact, existed, something we are always reminded of through the use of foreboding hints of the future. For instance, when Rahel, Ammu and Baby share a clumsy, intimate moment in a bathroom stall: “she knew nothing then, of how precious a feeling this was ‘like friends’. They would

never be together like this again”. Of course it never really was like this, like friends, and to believe that it was as Roy suggests, is to fall into the lie of restorative nostalgia, a fantasy of the past that resists recognizing the corruptions of memory or the need for taking individual responsibilities for one’s choices and actions, no matter how small or big they may have been. Thus though the twins recognition of the roles they played in the past, the choice they made, and the guilt they feel over this throughout their lives “is almost automatically predetermined”. Since as children they are constantly reminded of their marginal position and the threatened loss of their mother’s love, they persist in returning to the site of trauma. This moment of return and recognition also entails acknowledgment of the past by a character who would rather suppress it. Indeed Baby Kochamma is emblematic of restorative nostalgia.

Baby is a grotesque parody of her youthful self. She is living her life backwards, nostalgically clinging to the memory of her unrequited love for father mulligan and endlessly weighing her own level of responsibility for the past if only to remain in denial of it “as though she had nothing to do with the sowing and reaping”. She is now in sole possession of the family home and only because she had outlived everyone else. Fiercely vigilant over this possession after a lifetime of dispossession, as an unmarried daughter with no real power or place in her family and society, she trusts nothing and no one, creating perpetual enemies who might take away her belongings.

When Rahel returns to the house in Ayemenem, “swollen cupboards creaked”, and “locked windows burst open” as if ready to burst with the years of holding back a rotten and rotting past, “the way memory bombs still, tea colored minds” likewise the now poisoned Meenachal Rivers “once a site of childhood and adult fantasy and escape” has been transformed into a ‘smelly paradise’ of global tourism which cannot cleanse away the corruption of its history. Rahel is “looking for something”, determined to bring out hidden things’. She is hoping to recover and salvage the memory of Ammu before Estha was returned before their separation, because it is too unbearable to remember their mother after the events that led to the loss of her children. Rahel is plagued by guilt over the rejection of Ammu the last time she saw her – “wild Sick Sad” and Estha blames himself for Ammu dying all alone, having given up all hope. As children they could not understand their story or the past that Ammu played in the unrevealing of their “little family” and so “with the self – centeredness of children, held themselves wholly culpable for the grief”.

The problem though for Rahel and Estha is that they are incapable of recognizing or living with their ghosts because their reading of the past is distorted they are responsible. They are incapable of acknowledging that they themselves are in any way victims:

It would have been helped if they could have made the crossing.

If only they could have won, even temporarily, the tragic hood of victimhood. Then they would have been able to put a face on it, and conjure up fury at what had happened. Or seek redress and eventually perhaps, encourage the memories that haunted them. (Roy, 191)

Anger and justice are not avoidable to them because they have been made into the guilty ones, and even if they know as adults, “that there were several perpetrators”, there was only one victim (191) – Velutha: she “left behind a hole in the universe through which darkness poured the liquid tar. Through which their mother followed without even turning to wave goodbye. She left them behind, spinning in the dark, with no moorings, in a place with no foundation (191-192). Although Roy rejects the kind of victimhood that the restorative nostalgia of nationalist myths encourages, as the text persistently calls for the need to recognize individual responsibility and complicity with an oppressive system – even to the point of suggesting there are in fact no innocent bystanders, she does question here the extent to which there is an imbalance of guilt, responsibility and justice. The separation of twins from each other, the loss of their mother and innocence can never be validated because the larger nationalist narrates of Big God or the agenda of a nation's public longing for cohesion thus assure of the violent past and its displacements, always take precedence over the narratives that fall into the realm of small God, the personal despair and loss of the nation's displaced and marginalized others.

If the text is seeking responsibility not necessarily for the blame- since Estha and Rahel “didn’t ask to be let off lightly” but “only asked for punishment that fitted their crimes” (326) – then the cause for much of that grief and guilt leads back to Baby. She is the one who accuses them of being murderers and then forces upon them their impossible choice to save Ammu or send her to jail. “The inspector asked her question. Estha's mouth said ‘yes’. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like bolt. Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared” (Roy, 320). The children choose to believe in the fiction that Velutha did not die until their mother “shook it out to them”. But by then it was too late (Roy, 320), and even if Ammu and the twins didn’t die, then their “knowledge that they had loved a man to death” (Roy, 324) certainly meant for them “the end

of living” (Roy, 321). It is the end of loving because any small hope or promise for the future has been snuffed out, as the institutionalized violence of both the family and state, in their desperation to uphold the Love Laws and punch anyone who transgression them, because transgression guess the lie to that narrative of tradition and purity which reveals how truly powerless they are in freely determining their own futures.

The text seeks a route back to the recovery of what has been referred by the nationalist narrative and it is not simply a recovery of the motherland, but the ethical promise of the mother's desire. Estha and Rahel who are trying to recover some measure of freedom inherent in the ethical promise of their mother's desire to make a sense of the fragments to their story, which signifies “an entire culture cut off from self-knowledge by the violent imposition of a difficult set of rules. Their act of incest however is not an act of “shared ... happiness, but hideous grief (Roy, 328) because they know that the notion of home and belonging remains precarious. For they cannot simply erase their past of loss and separation and become whole again, even if Rahel appears to have grown into- the skin of her mother (Roy, 92) and “he was the one she had known before life began” (Roy, 93). The novel does not end with the utter despair of the twins’ transgressive act but shifts immediately to the scene of Ammu and Velutha beginning their affair. Ammu's promise of “Tomorrow”, although never fulfilled, resets deeper or closure and Roy “ask us as readers to consider its position as the novel's last word as a sort of plea for justice in the future. Moreover Roy never suggests that an idealized home would have saved Ammu, her children or any of the other oppressed figures in the text, thus achieving a nostalgia that is no more than an idealized fantasy of the past. The children and lovers do, however, reclaim a marginal space of belonging and safety by arresting their identity on the most intimate spatial scale” – their bodies and so even if *The God Of Small Things* appears to be a hopeless novel, there is optimism in the fact that while characters may be unable to re-vision their lives at national level, their deferral of such subversions to seemingly 'smaller' spaces offers some opportunity for the marginal to assert its voice.

There are “Small” moments in the text that are endlessly revisited. Estha’s “Yes” – an affirmation to save her mother but co- opted by the police in order to justify Velutha's death sentence – is just one such moment.

a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes.

And that they do, those dozen hours, like the salvaged

remains of a burned house... must be resurrected from

the ruins and examined. Preserved accounted for little events,

ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted.

Imbued with now meaning suddenly they become the

bleached bones of a story (Roy, 32-33)

Roy's text indicate that the social, political and cultural divisions in India have been strengthened rather than weakened due to the post colonial nationalist narrative which in the denial of its history of dispossession has insulted on the agenda of returning to its pre-colonial origins, a nostalgic narrative that relies on "restored or invented tradition" in order to establish continuity with the past (Boym, 42). This restorative move problematically rests on two paradoxes:

"First the more rapid and sweeping the pace and scale of modernization, the more conservative and unchangeable the new traditions tend to be. Second the stronger the rhetoric of continuity with the historical past and emphasis on traditional values, the more selectively the past is presented (Boym, 42).

David punter reads the novel " refusal to review the past as something that is over and done with" (193) as indicative of how the " heritage" of the past becomes the heart of darkness, the very means of obscuring history from sight, the false and crazy monstrosity erected on the site of the colonial, the edifice of denial" (195) ; and though " the entire novel ... can be seen as a painful exploration of the hidden roots of agony the results of this exploration can never be submitted to a single interpretation " (198).

