



## Social and Moral Transgression in *The God of Small Things*

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**Abstract:** The action of going against any law, rule or code of conduct is generally termed as ‘transgression’. Arundhati Roy’s masterpiece, *The God of Small Things* which made her win the Booker Prize in 1997, is filled with such characters that are often studied as transgressors. In order to claim their individuality many times they go against the social and moral rules. In this connection, this paper seeks to study the two major characters from the novel– Rahel and Estha – who not only break the social rules rather cross moral boundaries as well. However, their act of transgression is committed under some psychological tensions that need to be analysed in detail, and this paper is an effort to study them.

**Keywords:** transgression, morality, psychology

The transgressors in the novel are Rahel and Estha who not only go beyond the social boundaries but cross the moral boundaries as well. They are the transgressors not only in terms of society but in terms of morality too. Both of them are twin brother and sister but at the end of the novel they fall into a sexual relationship. They do this deliberately not in the stage of immaturity but at an age of maturity – at the age of

thirty-one. This act of the twins of falling into a kind of sexual relationship may be regarded as immoral or illegitimate by social institutions, but for the writer it is perhaps very human and natural. For the twins had been a part of each other sharing blood, body, breath, life and everything since their formation period. So they were one in all terms either physically or emotionally, although in two different bodies – one male and one female. It was the society that had considered them different but nature had formatted them specifically one. When they were separated from each other the family members, “consulted a Twin Expert in Hyderabad. She wrote back to tell that it was not advisable to separate monozygotic twins, but that two-egg twins were no different from ordinary siblings and that while they would certainly suffer the natural distress that children from broken homes underwent, it would be nothing more than that. Nothing out of the ordinary” (31-32). That way, the doctor herself was not able to understand their oneness that, “They had known each other before Life began” (327), hence inseparable. K.V. Surendran rightly remarks:

For the twins it was darkness, absolute darkness even before they were born. They lived in quietness and emptiness fighting a losing battle. They were born together with a gap of a few minutes, eighteen minutes to be exact. But they were strangers who had met in a chance encounter. But they had known each other before life had begun also barring a few golden moments like the ones they spent with Velutha, they were failing, falling miserable to live like their fellow children (68).

But unfortunately they were separated from each other after their mother’s death – Estha was sent to live with their father and Rahel was kept at Ayemenem with their maternal family members.

The first transgressor, who draws the attention of the readers, is Estha, one of the twins of Ammu. When Estha along with Rahel came to Ayemenem, both of them became the prey of a morbid stiffness. Baby Kochamma reminded the children of their insecure position in the house, and of their sinfulness for being half-Hindu and half-Christian kids. Chacko told them, “Ammu had no *Locus Standi* (57). Even Kochu Maria, the maidservant of the house did not hesitate to say—“These are not your beds. This is not your house (83). Consequently, they suffered from a sense of discrimination. During Sophie Mol’s funeral too, Rahel and Estha along with their mother were made to stand separately though they were allowed to attend the funeral. Estha was possessed with such a strangeness that for him using a surname became a problem, because Ammu was

uncertain as to whether she should resume her parental title or continue with her husband's surname.

Therefore, Estha wrote in his notebook "Esthaphen Unknown" (192).

He was treated as a lonely waif forsaken by all and felt himself like a fish out of water in that big Ayemenem house where Baby Kochamma, Chacko, Mammachi and everyone else were dead against him and his sister Rahel. He was like a caged bird that fluttered for a free flight in the sky of freedom, innocence and simplicity, but the society was so cruel towards him that it cut down his wings. The first traumatic experience which the sensitive child encountered was the misbehavior of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man in the Abhilash Talkies who forced the boy to masturbate him:

'Now if you'll kindly hold this for me', the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man said, handing Estha his penis through his soft white muslin dhoti, I'll get you your drink. Orange? Lemon?...Estha held it because he had to ... So he held a bottle in one hand and a penis in the other. Hard, hot, veiny. Not a moonbeam (103).

The effect of that traumatic experience which Estha had in the Abhilash Talkies was so strong that it sank deep into the psyche of the seven year old child and haunted him throughout his life. And, "Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms" (11). It is a psychological truth that the mind of a child is so sensitive that when his innocence inadvertently comes in contact with some horrible experiences, it begins to bleed and consequently the child is haunted by this nightmarish experience all through his life. And this is what becomes evident in Estha's case, who is seen suffering from a sense of claustrophobia and taciturnity all his life. Through the picturisation of this social awakening scene, Ray is trying to emphasize the fact that it is not like that parents need to protect their girl child alone they should pay attention to their boy kids in much the same way.

The second powerful trauma felt by the innocent mind of Estha as well as Rahel was their emotional blackmail collectively webbed by the family, the state and the administration for betraying an innocent man, Velutha, whom they loved so dearly. Velutha was under the police custody and was beaten bitterly for the unproved crime of murdering Sophi Mol. It was Baby Kochamma, who persuaded the twins to betray Velutha in the police station. She said to them, "If you want to save her (Ammu), all you have to do, is to go with the

Uncle with the big *meeshas*. He'll ask you a question. One question. All you have to do is to say "Yes". Then we can all go home. It's so easy. It's a small price to pay" (318). When the police inspector came to take the twins statement, Estha was sent with him where:

The Inspector asked his question. Estha's mouth said 'Yes'.

Childhood tiptoed out.

Silence slid in like a bolt.

Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared (320).

It might be urged that Estha was struck silent as a consequence of the sense of guilt of defeating Velutha. He had not only stopped talking, his mind also appeared to have become emptied of any consciousness of the past and the present. He was badly tormented and tortured by that nightmarish experience as a result, "He grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past (12).

After the above mutilated experience and Ammu's unexpected death, Estha was sent away to live with Ammu's ex-husband who by then had resigned his only tea estate job in Assam and shifted to Calcutta to work for a company that made carbon black. There he did not receive any kind of love and concern, neither from his father nor from his step mother who often treated him badly. The impact of her childhood experiences left an indelible mark at Estha's psyche that he, "finished school with mediocre results, but refused to go to college. Instead, much to the initial embarrassment of his father and stepmother, he began to do the housework. As though in his way he was trying to earn his keep" (11). Estha was so alone and desperate that:

Over time he had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was – into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets – to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye. It usually took strangers a while to notice him even when they were in the same room with him. It took them even longer to notice that he never spoke. Some never noticed at all. Estha occupied very little space in the world (10-11).

The experiences of Estha at his father and stepmother's home reminds of an adolescent child Phatik, the central character of the story, "The Home Coming" by R.N. Tagore. Phatik, the village boy was sent to



Calcutta at his maternal uncle's house where his aunt jeers and insults him without any rhyme or reason and, "a silent cry of the inmost heart for the mother, like the lowing of a calf in the twilight" (75) is haunted in the heart of this boy, where he dreams night and day of his village home and longs to be back there.

Next is Rahel, one of the other twins of Ammu. Roy presents some beautiful episodes in Rahel's childhood which clearly shows her rebellious and somewhat abnormal nature. At first, she was blacklisted in Nazareth Convent at age of eleven when she was caught outside her house mistress' garden gate decorating a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers. The next morning, she was made to look up the word 'depravity' in the Oxford Dictionary and read aloud its meaning in front of everyone. Six months later she was expelled from the school after repeated complaints from senior girls. Roy observes:

She was accused (quite rightly) of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with her seniors. When she was questioned by the Principal about her behavior (cajoled, caned, starved), she eventually admitted that she had done it to find out whether breasts hurt. In that Christian institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist, and if they didn't, could they hurt? (16).

Moreover, she was also caught smoking somewhat in the manner of her mother, Ammu. The other abnormal nature which she exhibited in her school was setting fire to her house mistress's false hair burn, which under duress, she confessed to have stolen. The teachers noted two remarkable things about Rahel: first, she was extremely a polite child; and second, she had no friend at all.

When she finished her school, she won admission into a mediocre college of architecture in Delhi. There too she behaved differently from others. She hardly went for the classes, "working instead as a draughtsman in gloomy architectural firms that exploited cheap student labour to render their presentation drawings and to blame when things went wrong" (18). The other students, particularly the boys of the college were also not happy to see Rahel's waywardness and almost fierce lack of ambition, so left her alone. She was also not invited to their nice homes or noisy parties like others. Even her professors were a little wary of her—"her bizarre, impractical building plans, presented on cheap brown paper, her indifference to their passionate critics" (18). There, "She spent eight years in college without finishing the five-year undergraduate course and

taking her degree” (17).

Rahel always kept herself away from the touch of her relatives as well because of her disdain for them. She rarely came to Ayemenem to spend her holidays, “largely ignored by Chacko and Mammachi...They provided the care (food, clothes, fees), but withdrew the concern” (15). However, in Delhi she became acquainted with Larry McCaslin – an American, who was in Delhi to collect materials for his Ph.D. thesis. He saw Rahel first time in the college’s library and then again a few days later in Khan Market and attracted towards her at first sight. Soon, they married and left for America. Like Ammu, Rahel also married Larry in haste without pondering much about anything. It was all like, “Rahel grew up without a brief. Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her. Without anybody who would pay her a dowry and therefore without an obligatory husband looming on her horizon” (17). The novelist represents Rahel’s hasty act of marriage through this picturisation, “Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a Sitting Down sense” (18). Her husband loved her and, “held her as though she was a gift. Given to him in love. Something still and small. Unbearably precious (p. 19). But one thing that became the cause of their marital discord was that Larry was offended by her eyes which behaved in such a way as belonging to someone else while making love, “He was exasperated because he didn’t know what that look *meant*” (19). The novelist is of the view:

What Larry McCaslin saw in Rahel’s eyes was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism. And a hollow where Estha’s words had been. He couldn’t be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers’ bodies (pp. 19-20).

Rahel’s marital relationship, therefore, could not remain healthy for long and the couple was divorced soon. After getting divorced from her husband, Rahel worked as a waitress at an Indian restaurant in New York for a few months, and then for several years as a night clerk in a bullet-proof cabin at a gas station outside Washington where “drinkers occasionally vomited into the money tray, and pimps propositioned her with more lucrative job offers (20). There she also experienced how two men were shot through their car windows and a

man was mercilessly stabbed to death. Those scenes again acted like fuel to her past memories.

One day Baby Kochamma informed Rahel about Estha's return to Ayemenem because their father had retired from his carbon black job and was immigrating to Australia for his new job as Chief of Security at a ceramics factory and could not bring Estha with him. So, Rahel and Estha returned to Ayemenem almost after twenty-three years since their separation during childhood. When their characters are scrutinized from a psychological point of view then it becomes quite clear that both Rahel and Estha were not treated well since their birth. They were despised by everyone for being half-Hindu and half-Christian entities. They were devoid of the love and affection that children are supposed to get during their childhood. They were the children from a broken home and a divorced mother, therefore, absolutely neglected by everyone. The only three personalities who loved them and cared for them were Ammu, Veluth and Sophie Mol, but all of them ultimately died. The premature death of all these three personalities proved a greatest misery for the twins. To add their miseries both the twins were separated from each other. Hence they suffered from a sense of alienation and lack of love; there was no one to look after them, to love them and to understand them. It was only the twins, who had been a part of each other from their mother's womb, were able to grasp each other in more pertinent ways. Though Rahel was united to Larry physically yet she could never unite herself with him emotionally. So, at the end of the novel when they met again after a long period of time, they could not resist their love for each other and ultimately fell into a sexual relationship as, "Nothing that...would separate Sex from Love" (328), the novelist dictates. The following passage is evident to understand their situation of meeting that night after a long period of time:

Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-coloured shoulder had semi-circle of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief.

Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much (328).

They looked for someone who might understand them and could say, “You’re not the Sinners. You’re the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the *victims*, not the perpetrators” (191).

After having gone through their character analysis, it can be stated that the unpleasant memory of their childhood haunted them stealthily, and the abnormalities that are reflected in their characters are rooted into their past experiences. All these psychological enormities engrave a permanent imprint on their innocent minds, which later on, develops into an incestuous relation between the twins. Roy picked out the smallest of the small events and shows how the sweet flower of innocence fades when they become victims of adult aggressiveness and cruelty. Amitabh Roy in *The God of Small Things: A Novel of Social Commitment* remarks, “Now, we are in a position to say what the novelist thinks about the plight of children in India. The first thing that strikes us is the insensitivity of Indian adults to the psychology of the children. Even the educated fail miserably in this respect” (99).

There are unmistakable clues in the novel itself which suggest that the reader should pay some attention to the psychological aspects of the narrative. As a matter of fact, human organism has certain basic needs which require to be fulfilled at any cost. Most of the psychological imbalances, sexual disturbances, psychosomatic sickness, hypertension and many other mental diseases are the result of such unfulfilled basic needs. These psychological diseases involve a danger to life, so everybody in the society wants to protect lives from psychological injuries. This sense of social and personal security develops in the mind of the child as soon as he develops ‘self’. William McDougall, a great psychologist, rightly holds the view:

Remorse is an emotion which has been commonly regarded by moralists as the most intense of the effects produced by the activity of that peculiar entity ‘the conscience’. It is a complex emotional state implying the existence of a well-developed self-regarding sentiment and, generally, of moral sentiments. It arises upon the recollection of some past action that one deeply regrets; like all regret it is painful owing to the fact that the impulse or desire, which is the root of it and which may be the impulse of anyone of several instincts is directed towards the past rather than towards the future, and is therefore seen to be necessarily and forever baffled (136).



Since their birth they were despised by everyone in the family and never got any love and affection from anyone. They were deprived of the love of their father and their father substitute, Velutha, was also snatched away from them. Their mother, Ammu, too died soon. All these incidents were quite shocking to the kids and they could never overcome their catastrophic impacts. In addition to these detrimental events they were also separated from each other in an early stage of their lives. So the vacuum they created in their hearts nobody could occupy that. Therefore, when they meet after a long period of time they cannot resist their love and affection for each other, and become a prey of their libidinal drives. In a more psychological way, their unconscious mind (Id) takes over their subconscious mind (Superego) where they fail to make a balance between what is morally right and wrong. Hence they might be called abnormal entities, but it may be stated that they are not much social in their outlook. They do not know much about social values, rules, regulations and laws, because there was no one to teach them about all these social code of conducts. In another way, it might be dictated that Roy has tried to portray their characters in a much natural way where they behave naturally. An article published in *The Times of India* under the title “The Indian Novel” claimed, “*The God of Small Things* breathes with the spirit of modern youth. It is one of our protest novels. An outstanding one. In its taboo breaking it goes further than all the radical novelists, it attacks several holy cows like the communist establishment, family, religion etc. (October, 1997).

Through these characters the writer wishes to utter that it is the time when the unthinkable can become thinkable and the impossible can really happen. In her interview with Alex Wilbur, Roy also said, “...my book is not about history but biology and transgression. And, therefore, the fact is that you can never understand the nature of brutality until you see what has been loved being smashed. And so the book deals with both things: it deals with our ability to be brutal as well as our ability to be so deeply intimate and so deeply loving” (*The Week*, 46).

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