



# Exploring PTSD in Children from Dysfunctional Families: A Reflection on *The God of Small Things*

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## Abstract

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating mental health condition that can affect individuals who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event. While it is commonly associated with combat veterans or survivors of natural disasters, it is important to recognize that children from dysfunctional families can also be susceptible to PTSD. In the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, the author sheds light on the profound impact of a dysfunctional family environment on children and the lasting consequences it can have on their mental well-being. Set in the southern state of Kerala, India, *The God of Small Things* revolves around the lives of fraternal twins, Rahel and Estha, and their tumultuous childhood. Raised in a dysfunctional family marked by secrets, abuse, and societal constraints, the twins navigate a world where love and joy are scarce commodities. Their experiences mirror the realities faced by countless children in dysfunctional families, and the novel highlights the profound impact such environments can have on their mental health.

**Key words :** *Trauma, Dysfunctional families, PTSD, God of Small Things.*

## Introduction

Childhood experiences play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's identity and personality. While many memories from our early years may fade away with time, some experiences, particularly those associated with trauma, have a profound and lasting impact. The different forms of trauma experienced during childhood, such as physical and sexual abuse, neglect, or witnessing violence. The fragmented and distorted nature of traumatic memories can affect one's sense of self, emotional well-being, and overall functioning.

In Arundhati Roy's phenomenal fiction *God of Small Things*, Rahel and Estha are the characters who had a tumultuous childhood. Separated from their father from a very young age, they never had a warm

reception and care from the paternal and maternal families. Estha's childhood experiences shaped his identity and personality. The development of these two fraternal twins has been shaped by their traumatic childhood experiences. Trauma theory argues that, Individuals who have experienced trauma may involuntarily repeat or re-enact elements of their traumatic experiences, often without conscious awareness. These repetitions can manifest in flashbacks, nightmares, or repetitive behaviors, as the individual's psyche struggles to make sense of and integrate the traumatic event. The repetition functions as a way for the trauma to resurface, demanding recognition and acknowledgment.

## Childhood Shaping the Adulthood

Theories and studies on trauma and memory starts with Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries. In Psychoanalytic theories regarding the origins and effects of trauma, Freud argues that the original event was not traumatic in itself but only in its remembrance. Because the original event continues to inflict harm, the talking cure or abreaction is required to understand the effects of the past and gain freedom from its symptom-causing grasp. Importantly, the traumatic event is understood only after a latency period of deferred action that delays the effects and meaning of the past.

“Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11)

Childhood is a crucial period for socialization, where individuals learn about themselves and the world around them. Interactions with parents, siblings, caregivers, and peers shape social skills, attachment patterns, and the development of a sense of self. The formative years of childhood, characterized by rapid growth and development, lay the foundation for an individual's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Emotional experiences in childhood play a crucial role in shaping emotional regulation, empathy, and the ability to cope with stress and adversity. Nurturing and supportive environments can foster emotional resilience, while adverse childhood experiences, such as neglect, abuse, or trauma, can have long-lasting effects on emotional well-being and mental health in adulthood.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can develop in individuals who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event. PTSD typically arises in response to experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event, such as war, natural disasters, physical or sexual assault, accidents, or acts of violence. It is characterized by a range of symptoms that persist beyond the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event and significantly impact a person's daily functioning and well-being. Children with PTSD may experience intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks, or distressing memories related to the traumatic event. These re-experiencing symptoms may be expressed through play, dreams, or conversations and can disrupt their daily activities.

# Rahel and Estha: Lost Childhood

In Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* the characters Rahel and Estha experience significant trauma during their childhood, which can be interpreted as contributing to symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The main plot of the novel starts with Rahel and Estha coming to their maternal house in Aymennem, a village in Kottayam district of Kerala. They were not received with much reception from the maternal family members. Rahel and Estha experience emotional neglect from their mother, Ammu, and their grandmother, Mammachi. Ammu is often distant and preoccupied, struggling with her own personal challenges, which leaves the children craving love and attention. Rahel and Estha experience a loss of agency and freedom as they navigate the rigid societal expectations and restrictions placed upon them. Their desires and relationships are stifled, and they are forced to conform to societal norms, leading to a sense of confinement and frustration.

A chain of traumatic experiences happens in their life and these incidents shapes their individuality and perspective towards life. Ammu was married to Babu without the consent of her family members and so she and her kids were not truly welcomed back with love and consideration after the divorce. Rahel and Estha always craved for love and attention from the elders and the discrimination was evident with the arrival of Sophie mol their cousin sister.

One of the major incidents which shaped the future of Estha was his sexual abuse in the theatre by an orange drink lemonade man. Roy narrates the event as

“He got a cold bottle and a straw. So, he held a bottle in one hand and a penis in the other. Hard, hot, veiny. Not a moonbeam. The Orange drink Lemon drink Man’s hand closed over Estha’s. His thumbnail was long like a woman’s. He moved Estha’s hand up and down. First slowly. Then fastly. The lemon drink was cold and sweet. The penis hot and hard. The piano keys were watching” (Roy 49)

After this incident Estha becomes selectively mute, unable to speak or express himself verbally. This self-imposed silence is a defense mechanism, a way for him to cope with the overwhelming emotions and confusion surrounding the traumatic event. His silence leads to a deep sense of isolation, as he struggles to communicate and connect with others. The incident robs Estha of his innocence and childhood. The betrayal and violation of this experience profoundly impact his perception of the world, eroding his sense of safety and trust. Estha experiences intense emotional and psychological distress as a result of the trauma. He suffers from flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts associated with the incident. Estha's trauma affects his ability to form and maintain healthy relationships. He becomes wary of others, finding it difficult to trust and establish emotional connections. The trauma has shattered his trust in adults and in the world at large, further isolating him from potential sources of support. “Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman 24)

Another profoundly distressing experience that befell the twin siblings was the agonizing rupture of their inseparable bond. Unveiling the forbidden entanglement between Ammu and Velutha, which tragically culminated in Velutha's demise, catalyzed a merciless and coercive severance of their shared existence. For

Estha, Rahel served as the sole sanctuary wherein he could unveil his innermost thoughts and emotions, rendering their separation an unfathomable tragedy that rendered him voiceless and forsaken. This traumatic event reverberated with seismic force, mercilessly unravelling the intricate threads of their connection, intensifying their already pervasive feelings of bereavement, forsakenness, and unyielding emotional anguish.

“As a consequence of the increasing occurrence of such perplexing war experiences and other catastrophic responses during the last twenty years, physicians and psychiatrists have begun to reshape their thinking about physical and mental experience, including most recently the responses to a wide variety of other experiences, such as rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on, that are now often understood in terms of the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder” (Caruth 11)

## Conclusion

From two exuberant and untainted fraternal twins to two adults engaged in a forbidden union of incest, the family played a pivotal and transformative role in shaping their behavioral patterns and undergoing profound identity shifts. They were subjected to the harrowing presence of domestic violence within the confines of their dysfunctional familial unit. Bearing witness to such acts of violence inflicts upon them a profound and enduring emotional anguish, instilling within them a sense of trepidation and a profound sense of helplessness. Rahel and Estha find themselves subjected to emotional neglect and abandonment, as their mother, Ammu, grapples with her own inner turmoil, rendering her incapable of providing the nurturing and care they so desperately require. Moreover, Estha's haunting and traumatic experience of sexual abuse at the ill-fated Abhilash Talkies engenders a complex web of psychological trauma, permeating the very depths of his being. Sexual abuse, with its deep-reaching repercussions, inflicts upon its victims an array of symptoms ranging from intrusive thoughts to aversive behaviors, and an altered perception of self and others.

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