

# Margaret Laurence and Arundhati Roy: A Thematalogical Re-reading of *The Diviners* and *The God of Small Things*

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Margaret Laurence and Arundhati Roy, two universally acclaimed novelists of Canada and India, could be looked upon as novelists of reality fiction, as their novels very intricately picture the reality of the society. Laurence and Roy, the twentieth century writers render greater insight into the post colonial societies of Canada and India respectively. *The Diviners* by Laurence and *The God of Small Things* by Roy, the award winning novels, have in their veins the nuances of society in which their novelists dwell. This paper attempts on a thematalogical re-reading of *The Diviners* and *The God of Small Things*.

*The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is the Booker Prize Novel of 1997 where as *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence is the recipient of the Governor General's Award for fiction in 1974. Roy's novel is her maiden and only novel that paints the South Indian rural life at Ayemenem in Kerala. In Roy's own words 'It's a book about how, over years, human society continues to behave in very similar ways, even though the details may be different' (Frumkes). Besides this novel, she has written on nuclear tests, social injustice, anti-globalization, terrorism promoting non-violence. Laurence, a celebrity in Canadian literature, has rendered classics -Manawaka series of novels -*The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, *The Diviners*. The last novel of the series, *The Diviners*, stands for search for identity and roots. The fictional background in both the novels owes much connection to the personal lives of the novelists. Roy's hometown, Ayemenem in Kerala stands out as the background in *The God of Small Things*. Similarly, Laurence's Manawaka is a fictional prairie modelled on her own town Neepawa in Manitoba. Both the towns are large enough lush prairies to contain class divisions patriarchal in dominance.

Laurence and Roy redefine the world in their own terms and re-evaluate the traditional role of a writer. 'In the tumult of feudalism's dying bangs, in the wide swathe, the narrative cuts through Kerala's modern history, in its pungent ironies, in the nerve-tingling passion, in the overarching pathos.' (Bino 1997 177) Laurence believes in honouring the past, perceiving the present, and looking towards the future. She, in 'My Final Hour', states, "All art ... is, deeply an honouring of the past, a perception of the present in one way or another and a looking towards the future" (196). Roy who equates

fiction to the real life believes fiction as a means of reflecting the world. Thus in their perception about fiction they are of same wavelength in incorporating the world they have witnessed onto the pages of their fiction.

The female protagonist in each novel is motivated by their search for love. Both Morag Gunn and Ammu of *The Diviners* and *The God of Small Things* live separated from their husband. Morag Gunn leaves Brooke Skelton for her first love, Skinner. Ammu divorces her husband and eventually falls in love with Vellutha. Both Skinner and Vellutha are from the lower rung of caste in their respective societies of Manawaka and Ayemenem. Morag and Ammu share much commonness in their pursuit and character. Both suffer from the trap of rootlessness and are in search of love that would satiate their emptiness. They have crossed the bonds of matrimony with their husbands. In *God of Small Things*, Ammu returns to her family, finding that "[her] status within the family is tenuous because of her marital disgrace" (Truax 2). Both of them choose their love from a lower tribe. The death of the two men is also mentionable. Skinner dies of throat cancer and probably would be denied a place in the burial ground as happened to his father, owing to their lower caste. Laurence writes, 'Yeh, well I guess I know why they really wouldn't have him. His half breed bones spoiling their cemetery. The Metis, once lords of the prairies. Now refused burial space in their own land" (*The Diviners* 289). Similarly, Vellutha is killed due to his relation with Ammu. His forbidden affair with an upper caste woman costs his life. Vellutha and Skinner face greater humiliation and finally even their death isn't honoured. In *The Diviners*, Morag Gunn recollects every phase of her life. Laurence presents the memory of the past of Morag in specific chapters. Morag recollects her biological parents and reminisces over the snapshots taken with them. Christie Logan narrates the war moments in which Morag's father had been with him and passed away. Reference to the world wars through the books and word of Christie makes us relive through the past events. The past lives deep in Morag's present life. And, she finally attains her birth right and goal in her pursuit. Thus, Laurence goes further stating, "the themes of freedom and survival relate both to the social/external world and to the spiritual/ inner one, and they are themes which I see as both political and religious" (Laurence 259). In *The God of Small Things*, the theme of small things is ultimately what the novel is centered around in the society, controlled by big things. Rahel, daughter of Ammu recollects her childhood with Estha, the events at Abilash Talkies, the Marxist protest, and other familial events of the home comings of their relatives.

In both the novels, Laurence and Roy accept traces of resemblance of their own self with their female protagonists, Morag and Ammu. Like Laurence, Morag strives hard with her writings and finally reaps her achievement with her novels. Morag divorces her husband Brooke and lives with Pique, her only kid. All this contain a trace of Laurence's life in its flow of the novel. Ammu takes up hardship as she parts from her

husband. She parents her twins Estha and Rahel single handedly. This single parent family finds every phase of life as a challenge. She stands out in the society of Ayemenem as a revolutionist. Roy herself admits that traces of Ammu's personality owe much to her own self.

The dichotomy of small and big within the society is obvious. Class discrimination marks very deeply in both the societies of Ayemenem and Manawaka. Each town has its own grades of human breed- the higher and the lower caste. Roy's protagonist Ammu, falls in love with Vellutha, who hails from a lower caste in the society. It was forbidden in both the societies to relate with the lower castes. When Vellutha was rehired by Mammachi as the factory carpenter, 'it was a great deal of resentment among the other Touchable factory workers because, according to them, Paravans were not meant to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal Paravans were not meant to be rehired.' (*The God of Small Things* 77). . In Manawaka, Morag, the female protagonist of Laurence, loves the half breed Jules Tonnerre. Laurence writes, The Tonnerres (there are an awful lot of them) are called *those breeds*, meaning half breeds. They are part Indian, part French, from away back. They are mysterious. People in Manawaka talk about them but don't talk to them. ...are dirty and unmentionable. (The Diviners 79)

But Morag and Ammu cross this cultural boundaries in their affairs with Jules and Vellutha respectively. Relationship in both novels is strained and is marked with a stamp of identity crisis, off the track marital affairs, etc. In *The Diviners*, Morag's relationship with Christie, her foster father is initially one of hypocrisy and denies acknowledging his fatherhood. Moreover, Morag as a rebel leaves Brooke for Jules and gives birth to Pique through him. But she is not constant with Jules too. She then lives as a companion of a Scottish painter Dan Mc Kavith for a particular time. In *The God of Small Things*, there are several downfall in relations -Baby Kochamma trying to seduce Father Mulligan, Pappachi beating Mammachi everynight, the polygamy practised by Pappaachi, the incest of the twins, etc.

Morag and Ammu beheld a patriarchic society in which their revolutionist thoughts are fettered with greater suppression. In Morag, we find a deep urge to authenticate her novels with her flow of thoughts, whereas she is bewildered when Brooke mocks her literary wit as a male chauvinist, husband and professor. There are instances in which Laurence throws much light on the male upper handedness towards the budding female novelist, who is none other than his wife. In another instance, Chas humiliates Morag by hurting her feminine body and arrogantly handles her. Ammu too faces similar humiliation and harassment as women at the hands of the inspector at the police station in Ayemenem, who taps her breasts with his baton, saying 'The Kottayam police didn't take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children' (*The God of Small Things* p.8).

Children in both novels are subjected to depression of paternal care. In *The Diviners*, Pique, whom Morag bears through Jules, thrives with an identity crisis and leaves home to experience her father's home town and meets her father. She faces society's brutal face when she encounters a gang of drunkards on her way to Manawaka. Similarly, Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things* live at Ayemenem since her parents' divorce. These twins encounter certain forbidden faces of the society. Estha is left uncared by Ammu in Abilash Talkies and he is molested by the Orangedrink Lemomdrink man. Then on, Estha loses her innocence and sense of safety. The twins finally depart from hometown and from both when Vellutha dies. But they meet after years and, they practice the forbidden act of incest.

Both the novels portray the children Rahel, Estha and Pique as much detached from family and their mother. Rahel faces her mother's cremation without a tear and doesn't inform Estha about her death. The novels, through flashbacks and flash forwards, associates to the past events. In *The Diviners*, Laurence swings to the past, employing the snapshot review by Morag, Christie's tales of the war, Jule's story of the Metis discrimination. Roy also holds similar technique of swinging back and forth. As the novel opens, there is Ammu's death following Sophie Mol's live death and the novel moves on with Estha and Rahel departing and with memories occupying the novel till the home-coming of Estha and Rahel.

*The Diviners* and *The God of Small Things*, thus stand out with greater reflection of the society, their prairie town, characters, besides authenticating the past in its present reality. And, Laurence and Roy are to be truly honoured for their unbiased and just portrayal of their own worlds. These novels are 'not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary functional part of social control, an important element in social change.' (Rockwell 1974 . 4).

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