

ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* IS A HISTORY HOUSE: A REAPPRAISAL

JISHA VG

Research Scholar, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Kanyakumari (Tamil Nadu)

CHRISO RICKY GILL

Assistant Professor, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Kanyakumari (Tamil Nadu)

ABSTRACT

History is a window that opens into the past and through that one can understand what his/her nation had been once. In other words history is a time machine that takes us to the past. History plays a predominant role in all the aspects of a nation. In the absence of history a nation is an incomplete one. For the betterment and development of each genre the support of history is needed. As far as the genre literature is concerned it cannot flourish without the support of history. Each nation's literature is bounded with rich history. Historical novels, plays, short stories, movies and even poems are so common in literature. The case of Indian English Literature is not different from this. In this paper the researcher mainly focuses on the historical elements in Arundhati Roy's evergreen novel *The God of Small Things*.

KEYWORDS: History, Literature, Novel, Indian English Literature

INTRODUCTION

The history of Indian English Literature also known as Indian Writing in English began with the works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. The approximate age of Indian English Literature is two centuries. Rich and variety of works have been published since then. The works include novels, plays, short stories, poems, essays, non-fiction etc. Like other world literature Indian English Literature genuinely reflects Indian values, cultures, traditions, philosophies etc. Through these works the world could understand the difference between pre-colonial and post-colonial India. Unlike other world literature India has many other regional languages which have their own literature too. So Indian Writing in English is concerned as the subcategory of Indian Literature (Aikant:1997). It is considered to be that the golden age of Indian English Literature is later 1980s. The genre novel has seen wide variety of subjects. The writers in this period took challenging subjects. As told earlier Indian Writing has undergone different subjects and one among them is history.

Most of the readers do not pay much interest in historical novels; instead they opt for novels that hold on interesting themes rather than historical themes. In India the rise of historical novels started from regional language and all these novels took Walter Scott's novels as model. The pre-independent era witnessed some historical novels but an array of novels evoked in the post-independence time. Some examples are Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle*, R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* etc. The novelists such as Bhabhani

Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandeya, Kushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar etc. wisely incorporated historical events in their stories. So these works not at all bored the readers. In such writers' works politics and other social aspects are predominant than the history.

1980s witnessed a great emergence of historical novels in which history was the important theme. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* brought a revolutionary change in Indian English Literary scenario. New novelists and novels aroused in this period and from this onwards the writers mainly focused on historical, political and social aspects. Some of the famous writers in this period are Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Gita Mehta, Nayantara Sahal etc.

Later the novels of 1980's and 1990's dealt history along with beautiful stories and such novels contained history, politics, romance, thriller etc. For instance Shashi Tharoor's *Show Business* and *Riot*, Manoj Das's *Cyclone*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. This article mainly focuses on what are the historical facts that can be traced and how they are narrated in this novel. Many studies have been done so far in this novel such as feministic perspective, ecological perspective, cultural perspective, political perspective, historical perspective etc. because this novel is dealt with different themes. This article tries to explore what are the historical references which can be found out from this novel and it does not pay much attention to its story and other elements. This article tries to capsule almost all the historical facts from the novel.

Suzanna Arundhati Roy became world famous with the publication of her evergreen novel *The God of Small Things* and later it was awarded the Man Booker Prize in 1997. Being a well-known writer she is a political activist too. She frequently raises her voice against the issues related with human rights and environmental problems. Basically she is an architect but her career began as a screenwriter. She collaborated with Pradip Krishen for a television series which was on India's independence movement and this might have helped her to understand the history better.

The novel is being narrated through the twin characters Estha and Rahel. Roy wisely incorporates the historical elements wherever it is necessary to enhance the beauty of the novel. Roy describes how Communism had rooted in Kerala's soil and how it became successful here. Communist history is being narrated by Roy by using the characters K. N. M. Pillai and Chacko.

During the 1920s Kerala's ambience was superstitious and caste ridden. Social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Chattampi Swamikal had bestowed their insightful thoughts and teachings to fight against the superstitions and bad customs. People began to accept new ideologies especially in the agrarian sector. In those days peasants were handled brutally by the landlords. This time some young politicians worked for Congress and Congress Socialist Party had the opportunity to meet some Communist leaders from central India. They exchanged their ideas and thoughts secretly because in those days the authorities opposed communist ideologies and believes. So the supporters of this secretly spread communist thoughts. For this printing presses had been begun across the state, mostly some houses were turned as printing presses where they printed pamphlets and communist slogans and circulated it secretly. Roy describes this historical fact like this in this novel "Estha went to the Lucky Press which was owned by old Comrade K. N. M. Pillai, and this was once the office of the Communist Party, where they conducted zero hours study meetings. They printed pamphlets, lyrics and slogans for Marxist Party and later these were distributed for spreading Communism" (Roy: 1997, 13).

Roy brings the reference of 1967 Kerala Legislative Assembly election. She narrates a detailed history regarding this. This year witnessed the division of the Communist Party in to two, the CPI and the CPI (M) (Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Roy maintains the historical reference on Marxism and Communism throughout the novel. Roy elaborately discusses the Communist Movement in Kerala in the second chapter of the novel. Roy investigates why communism was so successful in the soil of Kerala than the other states of India except West Bengal and Tripura. She explains the reasons for the success of communism in Kerala by using two theories. According to her the first theory says that the Christian population was high in Kerala. Twenty percent out of the total population in the state are Syrian Christians. Those people believed that once they were Brahmins whom the Saint Thomas converted into Christianity. Roy says that “Marxism is the substitute of Christianity in it God is Marx, Satan is bourgeoisie and Heaven is classless society and the church is the Party. But the people among Syrian Christians who had acres of land and economically sound were not ready to accept Communist ideologies. So such people opposed this party and gave vote for the Congress Party. According to her second theory the state of Kerala is placed first in the case of literacy. Though Christian Missionaries paved the way for education in Kerala, the role of Communist Movement is important too. In Kerala the Communist Movement was considered as a reformist movement which not at all cross-examined the socio-cultural and religious values of any community. So Roy opines these are the reasons why Communism rooted very deeply in the land of Kerala” (Roy: 1997, 66). Roy mentions two wars in this novel, one is Sino – India War or China – India War in 1962 and the second one is India – Pakistan War. In the 1959 Tibetan revolt India granted sanctum to the Dalai Lama. This action tempted China and began to dispute the Himalayan border and all these clashes gradually led to the war. A long border is there in between China and India. India claimed that the Aksai Chin belongs to Ladakh whereas China insisted that it belongs to Xinjiang. The War began on 20th October 1962 and came to an end on 21st November of the same year. Roy describes this history like this: “When the Indo – China War broke out Ammu was eight months pregnant. The War began on October 1962. It was a strict order that all the planters' wives and children should be shifted from Assam but the character Ammu was unable to move out so she remained on the estate. In November, after a terrifying bus ride to Shillong, and there were rumours of Chinese invasion and India's upcoming defeat, in between all these turmoil's Estha and Rahel born” (Roy: 1997, 40). Whereas she does not give much information about the India – Pakistan War. She mentions this war like this: “At the time of War Ammu gave up her husband and came to her home state Kerala with her children” (Roy: 1997, 42).

Caste system in India gives the dark side of the country and it is believed that the caste system originated in ancient India and spread widely across the country. The case of Kerala is not so different. From 800 AD onwards the Brahmins held the control of the Kerala society. The lower caste people were not allowed to put on upper cloth. They were restricted to enter in temples. The Christian community in Kerala is divided into Syrian Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants. Among these three a good position has been maintained by the Syrian Christians. They are economically sound and owned acres of land just like Brahmins. When compared to Syrian, Roman Catholics and Protestants were mainly converted from low caste communities and were economically in backward position. Roy explains that when British came to Malabar most of the people from low caste like Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas converted to Christianity. According to Roy's opinion the lower caste

people converted to Christianity mainly to escape from the untouchability and they joined in the Anglican Church. As a converted Christians they were given low food and wages so they were frequently known as “the Rice – Christians” and “they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire”. In the post-independence time only they understood that they were considered as an out casted people so they were denied from Government benefits, bank loans etc. (Roy: 1997, 74).

Roy does not forget to bring the history of Naxalism which is also an important movement in Kerala history like Communism and she cannot narrate the story without the reference of the Naxalite Movement because she gives a detailed history of Communist Movement in Kerala. The history of Kerala never came to an end without the reference of Naxalite Movement (Bijuraj, 2017). Naxalism is strongly associated with Communism and this movement was originated in 1967 when the Communist Party of India (Marxist) split into two – Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist – Leninist). Naxalbari is a famous village in West Bengal where a peasant revolt was took place and after this revolt the term Naxal originated. In fact West Bengal was the main hub of the Naxalite Movement but later it gradually spread to the other states of India. Indeed the Naxalite movement has a strong connection with Maoism and this movement mainly stands for agrarian sector rather than working class people.

Naxalite movement rooted in the Indian states such as West Bengal, Tripura, Sikkim and Kerala where this movement became successful. Basically this movement is based on the Maoist ideology and its aim was to fight against the inequalities in the society. It stands for the downtrodden or marginalised communities particularly for peasants and tribal people because Naxals took shelters in forests and in Kerala Wayanad district was the hotbed for this. Naxalism was begun as a political movement but in Kerala it was an intellectual movement than a political movement (Manjusha, 2014).

As told earlier Naxalism was a political movement and it fought for land problems so at first the government approved them but slowly the peasants had been trained with weapons by the Naxalites for armed revolution. In addition land reform movements tempted the Naxalites to fight against the government violently and as a result of this they captured thousand acres of land. In Roy's words “change the direction and with the support of the recent origin, the most violent group of the CPI (M) known as the Naxalites who had entered in a village called Naxalbari in West Bengal for a military rebellion. They trained the countrymen as an attacking team and captured the lands from its owners and threw out of them. After that they initiated an organisation called People's Courts to fight against Class Enemies. The Naxalite movement expanded widely across the country and created terror in each bourgeois heart” (Roy: 1997, 68).

Likewise the state Kerala is not free from violence from Naxalites who had been attracted by many youngsters during 1970s particularly campus students and that's why it is said that in Kerala Naxalism is an intelligent movement. The prominent figures were Varghese who was a CPM leader and K. Ajitha. The first Naxalite attack blasted out in Kerala in the year 1968 when the Communist Government was ruling. It was the Thalassery Police station attack and the whole state got trembled. This attack was led by Kunnikkal Narayanan and 300 armed groups with his daughter Ajitha who now acts as a woman activist. Moreover most of the Naxalite members were from Communists who had done many violence activities across the state. So they were expelled from the Party and the Naxalites sought shelter in forests. Roy says this “In Kerala people lived with fear in the already frightened air.

North had witnessed many killings. It was May the newspapers published a beheaded landlord's photograph. The landlord was from Palghat, he was tied to a lamp post and later he was beheaded by the Naxalites. Roy says that it was hard to tell the state of that landlord because his head and body were separated and the murdered spot was look like a dark pool. The then Chief Minister Comrade E. M. S. Namboodiripad got rid of the Naxalites from his party (Roy 69). Another citation for this from the novel is "Comrade Pillai's political ambitions had boosted with the expulsion of two Party members who had been suspected as Naxalites, Comrade J. Kattukaran and Comrade Guhan Menon and the latter was nominated as a Party candidate from Kottayam for the Legislative Assembly election (Roy: 1997, 119).

Apart from these historical references Roy also gives some other historical facts but this article brings forth only the major historical evidences. In Arundhati Roy's words what is history is "History was wrong – footed, caught off guard. Sloughed off like an old snakeskin. Its marks, its scars, its wounds from old wars and the Walking – Backwards days all fell away. In its absence it left an aura, a palpable shimmering that was as plain to see as the water in a river or the sun in the sky. As plain to feel as the heat on a hot day, or the tug of a fish on a taut line. So obvious that no one noticed" (Roy: 1997, 176).

CONCLUSION

History always acts as a pathfinder and a good companion to humanity for their better future. As a human being one has to know his nation's history but psychologically most of the people are not at all pay much attention for knowing their history. Literature plays an important role here because when incorporating historical elements with other interesting aspects the readers will naturally read such works and through this history will be understood. And at last there is no doubt to say that one who really wants to go to the past history will act as a time machine which takes him into there.

WORKS CITED

- Aikant, C.S. (1997). 'English in India: The Discursive Formation.' In Singh, R.S & Singh, C.S. (Eds.), Spectrum History of Indian Literature in English. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors. <https://books.google.co.in>
- A.K.M. (2014). 'Early Naxalite Movement in Kerala (1968-1976): A Study on the Issues, Challenges and Alternate Approaches.' Zenith International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 4(3),92-98. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/246575916/10-zijmr-vol4-issue3-march2014>
- Bijuraj, R.K. (2017). 'Tracing the History of the Naxalite Movement in Kerala.' The Indian Express Malayalam, <https://malayalam.indianexpress.com/news/features/tracing-the-history-of-the-naxalite-movement-in-kerala-rk-bijuraj/>
- Das, B. (2003). Postmodern Indian English Literature. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.
- Hardgrave, L.R. (1964). 'Caste in Kerala A Preface to the Elections.' The Economic Weekly, 16 (47), 1841-1847. <https://studylib.net/doc/8215279/caste-in-kerala-economic-and-political-weekly>
- Lidarev, Ivan. (2012). 'The Diplomat History's Hostage: China, India and The War of 1962.' The

Diplomat, <https://the-diplomat.com/2012/08/historys-hostage-china-india-and-the-war-of-1962/>

Mamberol, N. (2018). 'Historical Representations in Indian English Novels.' Literary Theory and Criticism. <https://literariness.org/2018/07/21/>

Roy, A. (1997). The God of Small Things. Haryana: Penguin Books.

Simply...Kerala Old and New. (1993). New Internationalist, 241. <https://newint.org/features/1993/03/05/simply>.

UK Essays. (2015). 'Indian Writing in English.' English Literature Essay. UK essays.com <https://www.ukessays.com>

PURVA MIMAANSA