

Pettifying the Ordinary: *Locusts Stand I* of Arundhati's Creative Dynamics

- Vandana Goyal

Abstract: *The God of Small Things* was first published in 1997, having taken more than four years to write, and then this novel met with a glowing critical reaction. In this Booker prize fiction Arundhati Roy comes up with its own poetics and aesthetics as it makes it different from the traditional one. *The God of Small Things* is one of its most striking and challenging features. The way in which story unfolds does not follow a conventional route from beginning to middle to end. The task of parodying the ordinary becomes all the more challenging. Throughout this novel Roy stresses the importance of things that are both big and small. In this article I have chosen one of the major parodic prop that is pickle and jams. How this prop is treated in this novel by her narrative style – the small is the parody of big.

Keywords: Ordinary, Post-colonial, Pickle, Parody, Bizarre

In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the very dynamics of creativity of contemporary new wave Indian novelists in English through a close reading of Arundhati Roy's Booker-prize winning fictional work *The God of Small Things*. "New wave Indian fiction comes up with its own poetics and aesthetics as it deviates markedly from traditional linear story-telling or cause-and-effect sequential narration of early Indian English novel". (Roy, 157). "The 80's were the turning point; Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, the key. It turned conventions and techniques on their head and handed over a new language and a brave new world to Indian writers". (John, 97). Influenced by post-modern poetics of subversion and deflation, these new Indian novelists (de-)construct fluid and complex post-colonial Indian reality through mundane memories and flimsy fantasies. According to Rushdie, "fragmentation [of memory] made trivial things like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities". (Rushdie, 13). The writers of the Rushdie clan do not believe in telling grand tales. Arundhati, in the course of narration, in one of her many self-reflexive moments, observes:

...They [the Great Stories] don't deceive you with thrill and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in... In the Great stories, you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't (p. 229).

Obviously, the grand narrative does not fascinate her as far as the creative avenues are concerned. Arundhati's views in this sense are very much congruent with French post-modernist Lyotard who observes that, "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation". (Lyotard, 37). In such a scenario of exhaustion, replenishment of literary imagination with something exotic

and startling becomes a creative writer's immediate compulsion and urgent concern. How to engineer those tricks and twists in ordinary tales which are bizarre enough to engage the readers' attention and juicy enough to sustain the creative endeavour becomes a creative writer's sole mission. Her creative dynamics are determined and conditioned largely by this paradox of creating the exception out of the ordinary, the bizarre out of the normal, the interesting out of the dull and the drab. The literary aesthetics slide down further. The sublime is not rendered ordinary, for that has already been accomplished by Rushdie and his noble descendants; rather it is the ordinary which is taken to grossly subliminal levels of the petty and the petulant. In Arundhati's novel, the ordinary is ruptured through deft parodic tropes. Since Arundhati does not narrate any heroic tale, the task of parodying the ordinary becomes all the more challenging. It is relatively easier to debunk and de-romanticize the glorious and dignified, than to displace the ordinary and the routine. In this sense, Arundhati takes the new fictional credo a step ahead of Salman Rushdie. Rushdie caricaturizes the historical, the mythical and the larger than life, Arundhati parodies the existential and the overtly autobiographical. Rushdie's protagonist is one among the chosen few "Midnight's Children", Arundhati's twins on the other hand are born in a State Transport Bus:

...They were nearly born on a bus, Estha and Rahel. The car in which Baba, their father, was taking Ammu, their mother, to hospital in Shillong to have them, broke down on the winding tea estate road in Assam. The abandoned the car and flagged down a crowded State Transport Bus (p. 3).

Such parodic reversals are sustained with rare aplomb and creative vigour. In this paper, I have chosen to concentrate on one major parodic prop (of pickles and jams) exploited in the novel, to reveal the levels to which contemporary creativity can stoop (to conquer the market). In the days to come, it so seems creativity has no option but to nosedive into those forbidden zones of the private and the obscene, the grossly mundane, and the insignificantly small which no serious writer of the past thought worthy enough to be a source of literary raw material. Creativity can no longer look upward, it has to sink downward, plunge down below (the belt). Jean Baudrillard terms this phenomenon "the extroversion of the interior". (Baudrillard, 132). In Arundhati's novel pickles and their preservatives provide a pretext for parody. In fact, the novel could be seen as an extended post-modern allegory, in which the whole enterprise of pickles and the minute operations ("...The pickling [involves]... and the squashing, the slicing, boiling and stirring, the grating, salting, drying, the weighing and bottle sealing stopped", Roy, 177) involved towards their making, constantly and consistently reflect on various situations and episodes that go into the very formation of the narrative. Pickles in this sense happen to be much more important than the characters, for the character define themselves through the pickles only; the "giant cement pickle vats" (p. 193) and jam bottles

outdo and outsmart characters for they happen to be the real lamp-posts or landmarks in Arundhati's narrative vision. Marching on in Arundhati's punctured universe means going "Past floating yellow limes in brine", "Past green mangoes, cut and stuffed with turmeric and chilli", "Past glass casks of vinegar with corks," "Past shelves of pectin and preservatives," "Past trays of bitter gourd", ... "Past gunny bags bulging with garlic and small onions. Past mounds of fresh green peppercorns. Past heap of banana peel on the floor. Past the label cupboard full of labels. Past the glue, past-iron tub of empty bottles. Past lemon-squash, grape crush" (pp. 193-194). "Pickle smelling premises of Paradise Pickles" (p. 193) is perhaps Arundhati's alternative (post) cultural space to Narayan's *Malgudi*. It is a micro-cosmic re/de-presentation of the macro-cosmic world. The goings-on of the universe are no different from what goes on in *Paradise Pickles*. The universe too is a place where "red tender-mango-shaped secret was [is] pickled, sealed and put away." (p. 192). The only space to "Think" or to meditate happens to be situated "between the wall and the black iron cauldron in which a batch of freshly boiled (illegal) banana jam was slowly cooling" (p. 194). It implies that even the so-called private space is no more valid or legitimate; it is occupied by the "illegal" (p. 194). Estha while stirring the thick jams undergoes moments of epiphanic revelations. In the post-modern ambience of the novel, the divine and the spiritual are revealed in the petty.

As Estha stirred the thick jam he thought Two Thoughts, and the Two Thoughts he thought, were these: (a) Anything can happen to Anyone | And (b) It's best to be prepared (p. 194)

In Arundhati's profoundly playful world-view wisdom springs from the stirring of thick fresh jams. A "Stirring Wizard" (p. 195) consequently, could be the most wise man around. The froth on the boiling thick jam makes "dying frothly shapes" (p. 194) that mock at the helplessness and loneliness of human existence:

The dying froth made dying frothly shapes | A crow with a crushed wing | A clenched chicken claw | A nowl (not Ousa) mired is sickly jam | A sadly swirl | And nobody to help (p. 194)

The more Estha stirs the Banana jams the more ideas come to his mind:

...as Estha stirred, the banana jam thickened and cooled, and thought Number True rose unbidden from his beige and pointy shoes. Though Number Three was: (c) A boat | A boat to row across the river (p. 196)

A point comes when jam stirring becomes a trope for boat-rowing: "The jam-stirring became a boat rowing. The round and round became a back and forth. Across a sticky scarlet river" (p. 196). This flimsy clubbing of thick jelly of banana jam with the sticky and muddy river Meenachal has subtle parodic undertones which the novelist arrives at or gravitates into by the very dynamics of creativity involved in post-modern aesthetics of parody and pastiche. The parodic inversion touches the crescendo when Estha compares his free rowing of jams with the freedom of the self, the

ultimate freedom or the freedom Indian democracy offers to its citizens. The brief conversation between the twins ends with a sarcasm that exposes the phoney promises of Indian democracy thus:

Why're you rowing the jam? Rahel asked. 'India's a Free Country',
Estha said. No one could argue with that. India was a Free Country.
You could make salt. Raw jam, if you wanted to (p. 197).

Even in moments of intense agony pickles continue to occupy the central place. Chacko grieved by the sudden demise of 'his daughter' Sophie Mol shouts at the other inmates of the house thus:

Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body! My
house, my pineapples, my pickle (p. 225)
Pickles anchor Chacko as much as his house does.

Paradise Pickle-products crowd the mental-scale of Arundhati's twin protagonists Estha and Rahel. In things dissimilar and distinctly different, they strike resemblances that shock the readers. After all, innocent children as protagonists have to depend on their child like vision to represent reality. And this vision kiddish as it is, has every potential to slip into the zone of the indecent. In Abhilash Talkies, when Estha goes to urinate in the men's toilet [His] he finds "himself too small" to piss in the urinal" (p. 96). He is not ready "to piss in the pot", because that would be "Defeat" (p. 96). In this moment of crises of manhood, Estha discovers, 'a squash bottle half full of milky liquid (phenyl) with floaty black things in it," (p. 96) along with "two rusty tin cans of nothing" (p. 96). Estha confuses these phenyl bottles with the bottles of pineapple squash with "pineapple chunks [floating] in syrup" (p. 96). Even in the toilet, Paradise products find their way. In Arundhati's topsy-turvy world nostalgia is not a simple excursion into a golden sublime past. Memories go back to the initial attempt of preparing the pickles for the first time. Mundane memories keep on revisiting the minds of the characters. Memmachi remembers:

How beautiful they had looked! Bottled and sealed, standing on a table near the head of her bed, so they'd be the first thing she would touch in the morning when she woke up. She had gone to bed early that night, but woke a little after midnight. She groped for them, and her anxious fingers came away with a film of oil. The pickle bottles stood in a pool of oil. There was oil everywhere. In a ring under her vacuum flask. Under her Bible. All over her beside table. The pickled mangoes had absorbed oil and expanded, making the bottles leak (p. 167).

The very fact that the oil spills past the holy Bible reveals that even Bible is under all kinds of threat in this universe of Paradise Pickles. The leaking oil from the pickle jars has potential to turn Bible into a soggy testament. Nothing can (including the Bible) stop the march of leaking oil. Many more images from the world of pickles and jams are sprinkled consistently throughout the novel. In the end, it so appears that novel is not as much a novel of/on the childhood of twins Rahel and Estha or the history of sleepy Kerala village Ayemenem, as it is a narrative account of the rise and fall of Paradise Pickles. The much discussed Ammu-Velutha

relationship, the caricaturization of E.M.S. Namboodiripad and his entire communist creed or death of Sophie Mol etc. are not primary events or the prime situations of the novel. Pickles are much more important than anything else. By narrativizing the rise and fall of Paradise Pickle, Arundhati succeeds in parodying the ordinary. Her immediate target is not to caricaturize an erstwhile Roman Empire or an imperial Mughal empire, her target is to pettify the ordinary empire of Kochamma family. Even the small can also be laughed at. This way Arundhati parodies the parody for ordinary parody involves the “ironic inversion” (Hutcheon,6) of the legendary and magnificent. The Small is a parody of the Big, by raising the structure of pickles and jams, Arundhati's parodies the small as well. This, it seems, is the irrevocable and irreversible direction (or as Arundhati would like to call Locusts Stand I) of creative dynamics of contemporary Indian English fiction.

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