Pamukkale Üniversitesi
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi
Pamukkale University Journal of Social Sciences Institute
ISSN1308-2922 EISSN2147-6985

Article Info/Makale Bilgisi
√Received/Geliş: 14.02.2017 **√Accepted/Kabul:** 31.10.2017
DOİ: 10.30794/pausbed.414845
Araştırma Makalesi/ Research Article

ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS:* REFORMULATION OF LANGUAGE AND STYLE IN A POSTCOLONIAL SETTING

Mehmet Ali ÇELİKEL*

Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a story of partition, immigration, love and trauma. While exploring the problems of identity of her characters in a postcolonial setting in India, Roy also reformulates her characters' use of English in an idiosyncratic way. This study, therefore, analyses *The God of Small Things* from the perspective of postcolonial theory in terms of linguistic and cultural hybridity. It also attempts to explore the novel as a postcolonial text that foregrounds the impacts of imperial past in partitioning the country not only into two different nations but also dividing people's lives into two halves and leaving them to lifelong misery.

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Language, Culture, Identity, Hybridity.*

ARUNDHATI ROY'UN *KÜÇÜK ŞEYLERİN TANRISI* ROMANI: SÖMÜRGECİLİK SONRASI ORTAMDA DİL VE ÜSLUP

Özet

Arundhati Roy'un *Küçük Şeylerin Tanrısı* romanı bir bölünme, göç, aşk ve travma öyküsüdür. Roy, sömürgecilik sonrası bir ortamda karakterlerinin kimliklerini ortaya çıkarırken, aynı zamanda onların kendilerine özgü İngilizce kullanımlarını da gözler önüne sermektedir. Bu çalışma, *Küçük Şeylerin Tanrısı* romanını sömürgecilik sonrası kuramlar çerçevesinde, dil ve kültürel melezlik açısından analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma romanı sömürgecilik sonrası emperyalist geçmişin ülkeyi iki millete ayıran güçlü etkisiyle birlikte, insanların hayatlarını da ikiye bölen ve onları yaşam boyu süren bir kedere terk eden olguları ortaya koyan bir metin olarak okumaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Sömürgecilik Sonrası, Dil, Kültür, Kimlik, Melezlik*.

In *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy explores the destiny of an Indian family in Kerala with London connections. The family has an eclectic story due to the strange mixture of its characters. The text that bears changing narrative points inevitably provides the use of a postmodernist collage in the text. Mammachi, the grandmother of the family, has a son Chacko who had an Oxford education and married an English lady called Margaret, but somehow got divorced and returned to Kerala after Sophie Mol, his daughter, is born. Ammu, Mammachi's daughter, is the mother of Estha and Rahel, the twins whose points of view dominate almost the whole text. The great aunt Baby Kochamma is a desperate character that spreads the bitterness of her disappointment in love in her youth. The novel is composed around Margaret's visit to Kerala with her daughter Sophie Mol after her second husband's death, because her friendship with Chacko restored and strengthened after their divorce and Chacko, who still sees Margaret as his wife, has a lawful right to see his daughter.

*Doç. Dr., Pamukkale Üniversitesi,Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü,Denizli.
e-posta:macelikel@pau.edu.tr

The God of Small Things in most respects proves to be a postcolonial text reverting the conventional colonial discourse. Estha and Rahel's relationship with their half-English cousin across the continents portrays the clashes of British and Indian cultures. They have an English education because of their Anglophile family. They always have to speak in English and behave in the way the English do. The way Arundhati Roy describes being English and being Indian is satiric in the sense that she both admires and degrades both cultures. Although she does not go deeply into imperial history, the ideologies against imperialism and the impacts of the Raj in Kerala, the attitude of the English teachers and visitors towards the Indians and the attitude of Indians towards the English as she describes brings a strong postcolonial and critical anti-imperial sense into the novel.

Roy depicts these through the eyes of the twins. The language is frequently childish as Roy uses the language of the twins themselves. Since their mother tongue is not English, they mimic the English language. For Estha and Rahel, English words are, therefore, only the combination of sounds, and how they sound is more important than what they mean - in most cases.

Through the story of the Indian family, there are generation gaps as significantly as the cultural gaps. The use of language and the structure of the story are affected by these gaps. In particular, the reflections of adult language and adult mind from Estha and Rahel's points of view are considerably inventive and experimental. Roy does not anglicise her characters, who on the contrary try to anglicise themselves. As the author, she emphasises the fact that they are Indians first. However, being Indians, they subdue the English language, just as they try to subdue its culture.

In *The God of Small Things*, there is a strong influence of eastern ways of story telling. In many respects, its rhythms are not western. In certain points where the characters of different cultural origins are confronted, the depiction of the differences of their behaviours and use of language is significant. Arundhati Roy mixes up each character's way of talking with the twins' thoughts and their mocking of the adult language. She also employs an unconventional narrative by putting together the pieces of various lives, and confronting English values and realities with those of India.

Roy specifically focuses on the children's mis- and partial acquisition and their idiosyncratic, parodic and hybrid usage of the English language, indicating their lack of acquisition. Yet, the grand-aunt Baby Kochamma forcibly makes the children speak in English, because she is an Anglophile. Her main worry is that she does not want to be embarrassed by their use of local language Malayalam in front of Margaret, Chacko's ex-wife, and Sophie Mol her daughter, by Chacko, who are both due to arrive from London the following week. Roy foregrounds her worries to indicate her admiration for English "culture". Kochamma's privileging of English culture in the family creates a controversy among the family members. While Ammu, Chacko's sister thinks that he never stopped loving Margaret even after their divorce, Mammachi, the grandmother believes that he never loved her in the first place, because loving her is not something he should have done according to her beliefs. Baby Kochamma, being the most Anglicised member of the family, always tries to make Ammu's twins speak in English, especially during their cousin Sophie Mol's visit. She severely monitors the children's private conversation, and if she hears them speak their native tongue she urges them to stop talking Malayalam and speak in English:

> That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. *(p. 36)*

Apart from the monetary fine, they have to write the expression "*I will always speak in English*" (*p. 60*) a hundred times – a typically archaic and traditional pedagogic punishment. However, she cannot make them acquire the language properly. The author's insistence on the fact that the children's awareness of the English language is not that of an English-born child exhibits the alienation of the native Indians to the English. As such, Roy explicitly satirises the Indian will to be anglicised in order to become a part of the western world. The inauthenticity of English usage by Indian people is explored in the twins' forced adaption of that "foreign" language:

> She had made them practise an English car song for the way back. They had to form the words properly, and be particularly careful about their pronunciation. Prer *NUN* sea ayshun.
>
> *Rej-Oice in the Lo-Ord Or-Orlways*
>
> *And again I say rej-Oice,*
>
> *RejOice,*
>
> *RejOice,*
>
> *And again I say rej-Oice. (p. 36)*

In "An Interview with Arundhati Roy", Taisha Abraham quotes from Upamanyu Chatterjee's 1988 novel *English, August: An Indian Story*, the author's statement on the English language as spoken in India: "*Amazing mix, the English we speak . . . I'm sure nowhere else could languages be mixed and spoken with such ease*" (1998: 89). Abraham points out that almost a decade later, Arundhati Roy's first novel contributed to the debate on the language usage of Indian writers writing in English. They create their own word and sentence structures "*through collaged words, regional aphorisms, and culturally eclipsed meanings*" (89). Abraham states that Roy "*wrenches the English language from its colonial roots*" (89). In the above quotation from *The God of Small Things*, the children's forming of the word "pronunciation" shows how they generate their own way of prevailing on the difficulty of pronouncing a word they have never heard before. In order to pronounce the word properly, they have to put together different words and syllables that are articulated to sound the same as the new word entering their vocabulary: "Prer *NUN* sea ayshun". Sound and syllable thus become prioritized; as "meaning" becomes secondary.

Estha and Rahel's perception of the English language is deployed throughout the novel. Roy describes things from the twins' point of view. This description is usually on the basis of language. Language reflects the cultural gaps, and it is apparent in Roy's style that these cultural gaps are revealed when the twins find a way of forming their own English language. As in the aforementioned examples, the words are the combination of sounds, and their meanings have less importance. When Estha and Rahel hear the English expressions, they reformulate the grammatical structure of those expressions in their minds. What Roy does is, instead of transferring their thoughts in quotation marks or describing them, to simply include their acquisitions in the main text. And the text is dominated by the twins' perceptions, creating a collaged narration. A childish language often eclipses the "adult" language of the text:

> Margaret Kochamma told her to Stoppit.
>
> So she Stoppited. *(p. 141)*

In a question she asks Arundhati Roy, Abraham mentions the way she deviates from the traditional rules of grammar. She frequently uses fragments and capitals to contribute to her innovative style. Roy's explanation to the impulse behind all her linguistic liberties is that she sees language as the skin of her thoughts. She admits that her architectural education has a strong impact on building her novel (1998: 90-91). When the reformulated English grammar as a skin of thoughts is lifted, it is sensed that reforming the English language through the children's mind is equivalent to conquering of English and the British, by the colonised. Eventually, when Margaret arrives in India, the twins hear the English language spoken by a native English speaker for the first time. Thus, it becomes more important how the words sound than what they mean. The way they hear the words is given in italics:

> "Hello, all," she said. "I feel I've known you for years."
>
> *Hello wall. (p. 143)*

The child logic about how the words are formed is significantly displayed. They believe that the language is created and given to them by a government where people are taught how to behave and talk. In the following example, Estha's resentful thoughts on government and his belief that how the word "exactly" should be spelled according to its pronunciation is a typical nature of the novel:

> "But when? When <u>eggzackly</u>?" *(emphasis added)*
>
> . . . .
>
> "As soon as I get a job. As soon as I can go away from here and get a job," Ammu said.
>
> "But that will be never!" A wave of panic. A bottomless-bottomful feeling.
>
> . . . .
>
> By "never" Estha had only meant that it would be too far away. That it wouldn't be *now*, wouldn't be *soon*.
>
> By "never" he hadn't meant Not Ever.
>
> . . . .
>
> For Never they just took the O and T out of Not Ever.

> *They?*
>
> The Government.
>
> Where people were sent to Jolly Well Behave. *(pp. 324-325)*

Here, the expression "to jolly well behave" that his mother often reminds them becomes a part of government's logic to teach people how to behave.

As well as language, Arundhati Roy focuses on other aspects of colonial impact on her characters. Anglophile characters are explicitly criticised, although not discussed. Anglicisation is seen as the influence of colonialism, because the English are regarded as superior in some cases. When Ammu, Estha and Rahel's mother, returns to her father's home after being seduced by her alcoholic husband's English boss and tells everyone her story, Pappachi, her father does not believe her. Her husband had a serious drinking problem, and his boss sent him away for treatment and in the meantime "coveted" Ammu:

> Pappachi would not believe her story - not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn't believe that an Englishman, *any* Englishman, would not covet another man's wife. *(p. 42)*

Explicitly, Roy satirises the way the Indian people are made to believe that they are uncivilised and only their people could commit such a crime. However, she merely puts this attitude to her readers, avoiding as much as possible a discussion of the issue. Brinda Bose points out that Roy has an apparent lack of knowledge of the "*contemporary … politics of Kerala*" (1998: 60), although her story is constructed within those politics. Yet, her description is clearly drawn to be seen as the reflection of the colonial impact.

It is difficult to determine the author's voice in *The God of Small Things*, because the text consists of all of its characters' voices, not to mention the fact that these voices are transferred through the twins' thoughts in a childish language. The standing point in the novel is simply, given in the descriptions and the dialogues. Roy ensures that the characters of the novel explicitly express their feelings and thoughts about imperialist and colonialist issues in a kind of documentary manner like introducing an interesting new tribe to be explored by a television viewer or a reader of quality-press "feature" articles. Dramatically, she makes the reader to see the fact that assimilation of the Indian society to the English culture in most cases results in the subduing of the Englishness by the Indians themselves. As Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams argue, the English language is exported as a "*homogenous language*", and it is "*imposed as an alien but official language*". However, it has become "*a diverse and heterogeneous range of hybrid languages, or contact languages*" (1997: 193).

In the childish language the author foregrounds, it is possible to come across certain words uttered by adults that are far beyond a child's perception. That is when it becomes possible to determine the authorial voice. Although those words are still either the protagonists' words or the words that are newly explored by the children, Roy draws our attention to them by placing them in the children's thoughts where they are alien to the mind of a child. This seems to be done to make it clear that the outside world is full of new and alien culture for children and everyday they have to acquire new words imposed by an imperial history. The initials of these words are either capitalised or they are wholly italicised:

> When he died, Pappachi left them trunks full of expensive suits and a chocolate tin of cuff-links that Chacko distributed among the taxi drivers in Kottayam.
>
> . . . .
>
> When the twins asked what cuff-links were for - 'To link cuffs together,' Ammu told them - they were thrilled by this morsel of logic in what had so far seemed an illogical language. *Cuff+link = Cuff-link*. *(p. 51)*

The English language amazes them in the way that it gives new names to their most familiar concepts that they know by other names. So they perceive those words in the way they are written or pronounced:

> But Estha couldn't help it. He got up to go. Past angry Ammu. Past Rahel concentrating through her knees. Past Baby Kochamma. Past the <u>Audience</u> that had to move its legs again. <u>Thiswayandthat</u>. The red sign over the door said <u>EXIT</u> in a red light. Estha <u>EXITed</u>. *(emphases added) (p. 101)*

As their perception of language grows, their plays of words become more of an uprising against the imposed language. Their aunt Baby Kochamma, being an Anglophile, what Chacko blames the whole family for, is in charge of Estha and Rahel's formal education. Her Australian missionary friend, Miss Mitten, takes her turn in the

novel at this stage to make the children read a baby book called *The Adventures of Susie Squirrel*. This offends the twins. Then they read her the book backwards:

"ehT serutnevdA fo eisuS lerriuqS. enO gnirps gninrom eisuS lerriuqS ekoW pu." (p. 60)

They show Miss Mitten, who is not amused, how it is possible to read both *Malayalam* and *Madam I'm Adam* backwards as well as forwards. Then they realise that she is not aware of the fact that Malayalam is the native language of the people of Kerala:

> She said she had been under the impression that it was called Keralese. Estha, who had by then taken an active dislike to Miss Mitten, told her that as far as she was concerned it was a Highly Stupid Impression. *(p. 60)*

The twins take pleasure in hearing the news of her death a few months later. A reversing milk van kills her. Ironically, the twins see a hidden justice in the incident. If one perceives the incident from the twins' point of view, then the annihilation of Miss Mitten by the author to discard her out of the story politicises the incident satirically. Roy's criticism of Miss Mitten for her ignorance of the place where she resides as a missionary underlines the way the Third World context is seen in Western perception.

Roy conceptualises the Western approach to an alien culture. Her characters appear to accuse their colonisers for being ignorant of their culture. They are annoyed by the concepts of exploration, rediscovery and being conquered. During Margaret's visit, Ammu, the twins' mother, resents the way Margaret looks at their indigenous culture. The "*imperial eyes*", as Peter Child and R. J. Patrick Williams call them, see it as a responsibility or burden to educate and lead the "*uncivilised*" (1997: 191). Therefore, the imperial eyes regard it necessary to impose identifiable judgements, gestures or thoughts when they come across unidentifiable, alien or "*savage*" ones (Childs & Williams 191). Gestures or habits that are unidentifiable to Western eyes become the concepts of exploration and they need re-defining. When Kochu Maria, the cook in Chacko's home, takes Sophie Mol's hands in hers and raises them to her face to inhale them deeply, Sophie is inquisitive about it. Once it is explained by the indigenous that it is a way of kissing, Margaret cannot help inquiring:

> "How marvellous!" Margaret Kochamma said. "It's a sort of sniffing! Do the men and women do it to each other too?"
>
> . . . .
>
> "Oh, all the time!" Ammu said, and it came out like a little louder than the sarcastic mumble that she had intended. "That's how we make babies."
>
> Chacko didn't slap her.
>
> So she didn't slap him back.
>
> But the Waiting Air grew Angry.
>
> "I think you owe my wife an apology, Ammu," Chacko said, with a protective, proprietorial air, (hoping that Margaret Kochamma wouldn't say, "*Ex-wife, Chacko!"* and wag a rose at him).
>
> "Oh no!" Margaret Kochamma said. "It was my fault! I never meant it to sound quite like that ... what I meant was - I mean it is fascinating to think that - "
>
> "It was a perfectly legitimate question," Chacko said. "And I think Ammu ought to apologize."
>
> "Must we behave like some damn godforsaken tribe that's just been discovered?" Ammu asked. *(pp. 179-180)*

When Margaret takes interest in the way Kochu Maria kisses Sophie Mol, Ammu is offended by this interest. The author satirises Margaret's curiosity about the Indian culture, and in a sense she makes it sound like an insulting curiosity. Ammu's reaction, on the other hand, seems legitimate in the sense that she feels inferior when questioned about her own culture by a westerner, because she thinks that her culture seems to a westerner as a newly discovered culture that is to be unearthed and understood.

Arundhati Roy continuously deploys imperial approaches in the novel. As the story is constructed upon the relations of people from two clearly distinct cultures, it is inevitable to run across clashes. She foregrounds cultural differences as a way of confrontation. This confrontation, in most cases as in the above example, brings

the coloniser and the colonised relationship into the novel, satirising both. The contents of Margaret's suitcase including medication to protect herself from unexpectable and unfamiliar sicknesses of the "heart of darkness" are described in a sense of disgust, because they reflect her worries about "anything can happen to anyone":

> Sellotape, umbrellas, soap (and other bottled London smells), quinine, aspirin, broad spectrum antibiotics. "Take everything," her colleagues had advised Margaret Kochamma in concerned voices. "You never know." Which was their way of saying to a colleague travelling to the Heart of Darkness that:
>
> (a) Anything Can Happen To Anyone.
>
> So
>
> (b) It's Best to be Prepared. *(pp. 266-267)*

Imperial idea of the colonial land is explicitly exposed in the phrase "*heart of darkness*" (*p. 266*). One must be prepared to anything that can happen to anyone. On the other hand it is ironic to read the children's curiosity about the souvenirs she brings from London:

> . . . two ballpoint pens – the top halves filled with water in which a cut-out collage of a London street-scape was suspended . . . A red double-decker bus propelled by an air-bubble floated up and down the silent street. There was <u>something sinister about the absence of noise</u> on the busy ballpoint street. *(emphasis added) (p. 267)*

Roy shifts her narrative structure from time to time in the novel to display how, on the contrary, the English are seen from the colonised eyes. The ballpoint pen on top of which there is an image of the streets of London is described as having a "*sinister silence*". There is a sense of paranoia in this description. The silence of the "*busy ballpoint street*" (*p. 267*) grows their suspicion of the English. This suspicion seems to be a reaction to the quietness in the nature of English people. The word "sinister" defining the "absence of noise" may in fact be expressed as a reference to the "kind" missionary tone of the colonisers as Roy puts it:

> In his kind missionary voice. *(p. 306)*

The contradiction of the English attitude towards the Indians is exhibited through the English idea of the colonised people. As Deeprika Bahri argues, the European thinking about the people from their colonised territories is dominantly racist although they mostly owe their existence to the labour of colonial people (1995: 54). Yet, the kind missionary voice contradicts with what Margaret's father thinks of the Indian people as deliberately exhibited by the author:

> Margaret Kochamma's father had refused to attend the wedding. He disliked Indians, he thought of them as sly, dishonest people. He couldn't believe that his daughter was marrying one. *(p. 240)*

It is ironic that Roy draws the reader's attention to Indian perception of England, which is unexpectedly respectful. The fact that despite their resentfulness, the Indians admire England and Englishness is very well presented in Roy's wryly-ironic style. The exploitation of their land and the assimilation of their culture do not prevent them from wishing to go to England or to be more anglicised. The exported English culture represents superiority. The colonisers in the impoverished colonial land impose the belief that there is no poverty in England.

The crudely portrait of the man selling soft drinks in the cinema is a perfect example of a third world country man looking for an opportunity to anchor Europe to get rid of his traditional homeland. When Estha and Rahel go to cinema with Ammu, Estha gets bored in the theatre and goes out the foyer. Parodically, Estha names the man behind the counter "Orangedrink Lemondrink Man" in his mind but calls him "Uncle" since it is a traditional way of addressing the older men. He offers Estha a free bottle of soft drink and calls him behind the counter where he sexually abuses him while he drinks his orange drink. Estha returns to the theatre, but soon feels sick. Ammu has to go out with the twins before the film ends. When they are out in the foyer, the Uncle offers them all drinks, but Ammu refuses. Ammu's excuse causes him to reveal his hidden admiration for England:

> "We must go," she said. "Mustn't risk a fever. Their cousin is coming tomorrow," she explained to Uncle. And then, added casually, "From London."
>
> "From London?" A new respect gleamed in Uncle's eyes. For a family with London connections. *(pp. 109-110)*

Chacko who believes his all family members are Anglophiles explains the reason of this Anglophilia. After Pappachi's death, Chacko calls the twins and tells them how Anglophile Pappachi was:

> Chako told the twins that though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a *family* of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. *(p. 52)*

Chacko's bitter formulation justifies the will of characters in the novel to be more anglicised and to go to England. Being trapped outside their own history, they inevitably suffer from a problem of identity. This certainty has made them a diasporic group. In terms of the diaspora -Chacko having studied in England and married Margaret and Rahel leaving Kerala- and the problem of identity -the twins acquiring the English in their own way- that Roy reflects throughout the novel, the setting is inarguably post-colonial, both because it literally takes place in post-independence India, and also because it represents a culture that is affected by an imperial process.

Arundhati Roy touches magic realism too when depicting the carpets covering hotel stairs where Ammu and the twins go after the cinema. Rahel resembles the red carpet on the stairs to the one on the stairs in the cinema:

> There were more red steps to climb. The same red carpet from the cinema hall was following them around. Magic flying carpet. *(p. 114)*

As well as postcolonial, Roy makes her text a post-modern collage by employing various narrative structures including magic realism. Since the setting of the novel is postcolonial, it is worth having a look at Linda Hutcheon's assumption that a postcolonial setting that is complex and troubled such as *The God of Small Things* carries "*a parallel and equally contested context that involves the post-modern as well*" (citation). The nature of postcolonial is ironic and reflexive. These characteristics of postcolonial writing "*have become almost the hallmarks of the post-modern*" (1994: 210). Whatever the setting and whoever the protagonists are, her style still remains out of the conventional story telling devices in the sense that she creates her own way of using the English language with a liberty of reformulating grammar rules through the minds of children.

The outrageous erotic and the ideologies in the novel, though ideologies are not discussed in depth, are also significant as they emerge in a traditionally strict and religious society depicted in the novel. Surprisingly, the fact that the characters, however they may seem to be Anglophiles, are indeed in rebellion against the imperial impacts gives a strong anti-imperial sense to the novel. The postmodern characteristics of the novel are caused by the postcolonial setting and time of the narration especially in terms of language usage which is deconstructive. The unexpected situations and interactions between the characters, due to their diaspora and problem of identity originating from the imperial process, makes the text more of a collage.

BIBLIGORAPHY

Abraham, T. (1998). "An Interview with Arundhati Roy", **ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature***,* 29/1, January, pp: 82-89.

Bahri, D. (1995). "Once More with Feeling: What is Postcolonialism?", **ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature***,* 26/1, January, pp: 51-82.

Bose, B. (1998). "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'", **ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature***,* 29/2, April, pp: 59-72.

Childs, P. & Williams, P. R. J. (1997). **An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory***,* Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, London.

Hutcheon, L. (1994). "The post always rings twice: the postmodern and the postcolonial", **Textual Practice***,* 8/2, Summer, pp: 205-38.

Roy, A. (1997). **The God of Small Things**, Flamingo, London.