

## Concept of Parenthood in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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**Abstract.** Parenthood has been one of the most concerned areas of research for every decade. It is the practice of taking good care of one's offspring to make sure on their part that they grow up in a safe, sound, healthy and happy environment. Children are the future capita of the nation they belong to. In this fast growing global modern world where human relationships are getting complicated day by day, we need to focus and understand parent-children relationship in its every fold. Parents are the first with whom a child establishes his or her relationship after its entry to this mortal world. This relationship stays for the lifetime. *The God of Small Things* is the only novel by Arundhati Roy with multidimensional interpretations at various levels. In this paper my endeavour is to study parenthood through the characters of this novel belonging to three consequent generations.

**Keywords :** Parenthood; relationship; foster parents; adoption; single parenting.

“Parents are by no means exempt from the intoxication of dominion.”  
- Johnson: *Rambler*#148(August 17, 1751)

“The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.”

-Theodore Hesburgh

Parenthood means ‘the state of being a parent’. The etymology of parenthood is from Latin meaning ‘to give birth’. So parenthood is a quality or feature associated with living beings, especially human beings. The parents are the one from whom one immediately biologically descends. Parenthood is considered to be a bliss that a couple enjoy after the birth of their offspring. Also, it can be attained and enjoyed by becoming parent of step children or any adopted children. Now as a couple after becoming father and mother respectively, it's their joint venture and responsibility to raise their young ones into rational human beings. Parents can be a sponsor, supporter, owner and protector. Both the parents tend to divide these responsibilities among themselves for their ease, comfort and to give their maximum possible effort in the child's upbringing, along with other responsibilities and duties of their life. In India, we mostly have patriarchal families, where the male member is the head of the family and also mostly the earning member. Hence, the financial security is often provided by the father, in providing good food, clothing, shelter

and education. Mother lays the foundation of a child's personality and future by installing in him or her moral and ethical values. She teaches how to become a responsible civilian, how to distinguish good from bad and to achieve success by remaining optimist.

Parenthood varies according to various culture and tradition. It is significant not only for family life but also for society as a whole. In India we have joint family concept, but due to western influence and changing life style of Indians we now-a-days generally come across nuclear families. In Indian culture and tradition beside parents, grandparents also play a vital role in the bringing-up of a child and contribute to their physical and mental growth. A child learns to respect and value people and tradition. Also the relationship between their parents and grandparents serve the purpose of a model or example for their own relationship with their parents in future. Good parenting is not only about preaching facts and developing skills and making them educated in terms of certain degrees and diploma. Rather it aims at creating and providing a supportive environment for children's independent learning. Parents by showering their infinite love, care and affection with the blend of punishments, scolding and rare beatings make them disciplined and teach to love and respect others. Hence, good parenthood shapes the whole personality, conduct and future of individuals during their childhood days.

Suzanna Arundhati Roy is a screenplay writer, actress, critic, essayist and political activist, with a free mind but still her feet are grounded on contemporary human issues, conditions and realities of life and its stereotypes. Therefore, she denounces herself to be a professional novelist. Till date, *The God of Small Things*, is her only novel, to make her a global personality of wide repute and bag her acclaimed prizes. This is a semi-autobiographical novel, which overtly and covertly connects us to all its characters to decipher the problem associated with them. She is a self-made woman, nurtured by the realities of life without any silver spoon in her mouth. She is bold enough to state and raise her thoughts and denounce the unnecessary traditions, rules and restrictions. Roy was born in Shillong, Meghalaya to a Keralite Christian mother and a Bengali Hindu father. She spent her childhood in Aymanam in Kerala which she mentions in her autobiographical book, *The God of Small Things* as Ayemenem, her maternal grandparents' place. She has also confined her characters and incidents to mostly her fictional region called Ayemenem, like Hardy's Wessex and R.K. Narayan's Malgudi. Roy's mother was also a divorcee like her fictional character Ammu. Her father is similar to what she describes about Rahel's father. The novel is filled with Roy's childhood memories. Healthy, sound and safe childhood is the foundation of strong and vibrant personality.

In the novel, we come across three consequent generations of parents. This is an Indian family, which geographically belongs to South India. The family

Concept of Parenthood in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* long ago got converted into Syrian Christian, with lost original ancestry according to Chacko. They all were almost Anglophiles. This was a joint family living in Ayemenem. But we find its family members disjointed. 'Reverend E. John Ipe(also known as Punyan Kunju), priest of the Mar Thoma Church and her spouse Aleyootty Ammachi form the first generation parents. They were the parents of Navomi Ipe(also known as Baby Kochamma) and Benaan John Ipe (also known as Pappachi),an entomologist. Pappachi and his spouse Mammachi were second generation parents. Mammachi and Pappachi's only son and daughter Chacko and Ammu respectively become the third generation parents in this novel. Sophie Mol, Rahel and Estha are the fourth generation members of this family. Sophie Mol dies at early age whereas Rahel and Estha are the only living, disturbed, distressed, last generation members having identity crisis because of their disturbed devastated and abandoned childhood.

Punyan Kunju and Ammachi appear in the novel as very liberal, caring, affectionate and loving parents. They never discriminated their children on any ground. They nearly tried to practise fare parenthood, giving them their due space and making them self-dependent. But it's also part of parenthood to keep check and track of their children's activities and behaviour at home and in public. Therefore, Baby Kochamma becomes the epitome of such spoiled children, who become stubborn, arrogant, overconfident and self-centred due to unchecked love and care. Hence, it's well said that 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. Her passionate love for Father Mulligan which never had any future becomes the reason for the consequences of wrong decisions in her life. The frustration of unconsummated love alienated her from her own family. This beaming love was not known to her parents. Hence she was entrapped in her own secretive ways and reached other phase of life instead of her love life in totally different fashion. She lacked proper counselling but still out of sheer concern her parents decided to educate her further. She was made literate and was further educated with two year diploma from Rochester in Ornamental Gardening :

To keep her from brooding, her father gave Baby Kochamma charge of the front garden of the Ayemenem House, where she raised a fierce, bitter garden that people came all the way from Kottayam to see... (Roy 1997:26)

Moreover, Baby Kochamma was not any nature viewer or admirer. What fascinated her was all lavish foreign goods (people, language, culture, etc.) and comfortable zone. But after tasting failure in her love and affection for Father Mulligan, she turned bitter slowly and gradually. Her father's efforts too, failed in preventing his daughter, becoming Kurtz. Due to her foreign degree,

Like a lion : tamer she tamed twisting vines and

nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and chinese guava.(26-27)

Thus it can be inferred that literally she was made a foster parent of certain flora species. But she proves herself to be a tyrant and irresponsible caretaker or so-called parent. She just pampered them to have her time spent in playful manner showing her diploma degree to the world. Marriage was substituted by further foreign education. Likewise, garden was like her adopted child to compensate for her childlessness. Just due to this literary induced fondness for flowers, she loved anthurium the most and had a collection of them, "the Rubrum; the honeymoon', and a host of Japanese varieties".(26) But soon the garden was left abandoned, "*left to its own devices*"(27) like adult is made free of guardianship after certain period of time. But they don't turn their ear deaf or eyes blind to become ignorant of them completely, as Baby Kochamma turned to be. She failed to understand life and spirit of humanity which is needed to understand humans. The liveliness of garden failed to attract her and resist her from turning to the mechanical and artificial life. As a daughter she defiled her father. She took undue advantage of love, care, affection and freedom bestowed on her by her parents.

Parenthood in spouse is also the resultant of good understanding, love, care and respect among themselves. As parents they become the role model to be followed by their own children in future, unconsciously. This mutual relationship was not upto the mark among Pappachi and Mammachi. As a result, Ammu was its great sufferer or victim. The grandparents of Baby Kochamma and Pappachi did not ever think of or practise gender discrimination among their grandchildren. Therefore, in his will he considered all his grandchildren to be his jewels irrespective of their gender:

(Baby Kochamma's grandfather's) will in which, describing her grandchildren he had written: *I have seven jewels one of which is my Koh-i-noor*. He went on to bequeath little bits of money and jewellery to each of them... (25)

But this trait was absent in the DNA of Pappachi. He is everytime jealous of his own trustworthy, loyal, obedient and honest wife. He treats his only daughter in the same way. He cares too little for her as a father and her mother acts as a helpless woman, to be just the victim of domestic violence subjected upon her by her own husband :

As a child she had learned very quickly to disregard the Father Bear Mother Bear stories she was given

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to read. In her version, Father Bear beat Mother Bear with brass vases...Ammu had endured cold winter nights in Delhi hiding in the mehndi hedge around their house...because Pappachi had come back from work out of sorts, and beaten her and Mammachi and driven them out of their home...(180-181)

Chacko is Ammu's elder brother. He is sent to Oxford for his further studies whereas Ammu is prohibited from studying further as she is a girl. This decision was not due to any financial crisis rather it was due to the biasness of Pappachi on her account. He least cared for her future prospects and marriage. According to Pappachi college education was an unnecessary expense. Therefore, Ammu finished her schooling and returned to Ayemenem from Delhi with him the same year after the retirement of his father from his job. All the jewellery and asset possessed by Ammu's parents which were discovered after their death were enough to educate her or provide financial security to help her to establish herself as an independent parent for her children. Mammachi was denied of any decision making authority or right. Thus, Ammu is justified to some extent for the decisions she took to move on in her life which proved fatal later on.

In nature there are many species reproducing their young ones, but the acts of laying egg or giving birth and raising them, are completely performed only by the females and males do not contribute to it. This thing is similar to other species of animal kingdom mentioned in this novel like bats, kangaroos, octopus etc. Hence, Ammu too, nurtures her twins without her husband. Margaret Kochamma also rears Sophie Mol without Chacko(Sophie's biological father). Thus, the novel tends to group all the females of animal kingdom of different species as mothers and single parent to their offspring. Single parenting is not a shame for something to make oneself look down upon or make the females appear weak and gain sympathy or over burdened with responsibilities. In fact it shows the potential strength, capability and caring nature and attitude to support and propagate life on the earth being completely independent of any male support after she conceives. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne is also a single parent of her illegitimate daughter, Pearl, being already charged with adultery and punished for the same. But she is a strong-willed woman. She becomes a kind of compassionate maternal figure to raise her daughter and imbue all those society's morals, manners and rationality and finally marrying her off well.

Ammu tries to save her marriage after being subjected to all the atrocities by her husband but at last she quits. It's right that a child needs mother the most but father is needed too. When the same atrocities started falling on her twins, it was a strong mother's decision that Ammu returned to her parents at Ayemenem.

She never differentiates between her twins for being a boy or girl as she was herself subjected to gender discrimination by her father and to some extent by her mother and Baby aunt as they had patriarchal mind set, no matter they too were women. She rears her twins showing her bold and confident personality to them by stating that she loved them double and dearly. She was their father and mother both. According to the Researcher Professor Ronald Rohner, fatherly love is important and key to a child's personality development. Although Ammu tries to play the dual role of both mother and father for the twins but she has her own limitations too. Father is not meant just for financial support and security rather for emotional development, too. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously Rahel and Estha see and enjoy that fatherly figure in Velutha. According to researches, after examining the cases of more than 10,000 sons and daughters, it was revealed how a cold or distant father can damage a child's life, sometimes for decades to come. This theory seems to be very much practical in case of Rahel and Estha. Both the twins had unconsciously replaced their biological father with Velutha, who was very caring, affectionate, loving and protective to them. But after his planned and bribed murder both have to pay for it heavily for the rest of their life. Estha was sent to his biological Bengali father but his cold relationship with him further damages his childhood and life. Rahel also seems to be deeply hurt and disturbed by Velutha's loss. She remains at Ayemenem after the incident without Ammu, Estha and Velutha - the three persons with whom she was too much attached and enjoyed their company. Somewhere at unconscious level she held Ammu responsible for all these sudden, drastic and life-moulding events. She never expresses them through her words but of course, it's apparent in her behaviour towards Ammu. She was not sad or in grief at the time of Ammu's cremation. She turned herself indifferent to her mother's behaviour and words and gradually, after her death, to the whole family, even more unconcerned about her maternal relations after she went to Delhi. This was the resultant of lost parenthood which was never compensated with parenthood from her uncle Chacko or her grandmother, Mammachi :

After Ammu died... Rahel drifted. From school to school. She spent her holidays in Ayemenem, largely ignored by Chacko and Mammachi... In matters related to the raising of Rahel, Chacko and Mammachi tried, but couldn't. They provided the care (food, clothes, fees), but withdrew the concern.(15)

In India, the relatives are considered to be the foster parents or guardians in absence of or after the death of child's biological parents. Likewise, Rahel was to be taken care of by her maternal relatives after the death of Ammu. Hence, the emotional crisis in both the twins results in their silent and vacuumed youth with their inability to be in any kind of relationship with anyone except with the only option of incest, to satisfy themselves physically and mentally. In Indian families

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this is often seen that the sense of responsibility as parents often crop up in them just for their own children inheriting their genes in them. Chacko lost the guardianship of his only daughter, Sophie Mol after his divorce Margaret Kochamma. No doubt, he cared and loved her daughter dearly but the sense of that fatherhood was only ignited for Sophie and not for Rahel as they both were the children of the same family, having blood relations too. Parenthood is not about just providing the material things. It's also about caring and nurturing the young ones, emotionally and spiritually. Rahel fails to heal Sophie's loss in Chacko's life. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the Sanskrit phrase, which means 'the whole world is one family' ought to be practised and that ideology and concept seems to be well practiced by Joe. Margaret Kochamma remarries Joe, who not only proves to be a better life partner for her compared to Chacko, but also one of the best fathers in the world for Sophie(according to Sophie herself). The fact based on the review of 36 studies from around the world with the conclusion that father's love is equally important as is the mother's love to youngsters is well justified in the case of Sophie. Joe's untimely and accidental death does bring sorrow and agony to both Sophie and her mother. But the treasure of love, strong bonding and beautiful cherishing memories provide both the strength and confidence to be strong to face every kind of hardship that can be in the path of life :

She had (a)Informed Chacko that even though he was her Real Father, she loved him less than Joe – (which left him available – even if not inclined – to be the surrogate father of certain two-egg persons greedy for his affection).(189)

Here, Joe stands similar to Tom Brangwen who appears as a character in D.H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow*. He also like Joe, loved and married a Polish widow who was having a daughter in need of a father. Joe and Tom both love and nurture their step daughter Sophie and Anna, respectively. In playing the role of a step parent Joe is also similar to Ishita, a character in Manju Kapur's novel *Custody*. The former is the step-father and the latter is the step-mother. But both as a step-parent proves to be the best in their roles of parenthood compared to the natural or biological parents, Chacko and Shagun, respectively.

Parenting is not something simple and easy-going task for everyone. It is a great responsibility on one's shoulder to be performed with utmost care and whole-heartedly. It has a large impact on the development of young children. Parents are like backbones to their children, who lay the foundation for their bright future and adorable personality. In this very novel, Roy artistically portrays and delineates various types of parenthood by biological fathers and mothers, adoption and shared parenting, and also expresses her views about step families and single parenting. In recent years, the theme of parenthood has attracted the attention of the researchers

as it is associated with children's emotional, developmental and behavioural disorders. Baby Kochamma takes two year diploma course in gardening but due to her lack of interest and ignorance, the garden wilts out, helplessly. She has to train herself for growing ornamental plants. Here lies the sarcasm. But to bring up a human child there is no coursework, diploma, workshop or training. This is how we are neglecting our future generation, our own race just taking it for granted. Children are the seeds of tomorrow's humanity and if they are diseased we cease our tomorrow and confine ourselves to today only.

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