

The God of Small Things

By Arundhati Roy

London: Flamingo, 1997.

Reviewed by Lynn Maalouf

About the author: Born in 1961, of a Bengali Hindu father and a Christian mother from Kerala, Arundhati Roy spent her childhood in Ayemenem, the village where the book's story is set. Following her studies in architecture, she worked as a scriptwriter and a production designer. In 1996, she published her first novel, **The God of Small Things**, which won the notorious British Booker prize a year later. The book was thereafter translated into 16 languages. She is the first non-expatriate Indian author and the first Indian woman to win the Booker Prize. She lives in New Delhi.

Estha and Rahel: the story of two-egg twins, brother and sister, "us and we"; a story to grasp with the senses, with aroused intuition. There is no beginning, no end, nor any linear progression. The book is structured in a pure post-modern, deconstructed literary fashion. The chapters alternate between past and present, childhood and adulthood, dramatic moments and daily routines – Small Things and Big Things. Words oscillate from adults' complexity and hypocrisy, to children's inventive and fragile imagination. The novel combines a dextrous manipulation of time to human intimacy, with the interaction of a multitude of characters and their stories.

Set in Ayemenem, a small Indian village, in the 1960s, **The God of Small Things** relates the story of the Kochamma family, their two 8 year-old twins, Estha and Rahel, growing up among their mother Ammu, a divorcee who had fled her husband's alcoholism, their grandmother and founder of a Pickle factory, Mammachi, their Oxford-educated uncle, Chacko, and Baby Kochamma their grandaunt, who nurtures substantial bitterness initiated by a one-sided love story, a bitterness that will eventually harm everyone around her.

The book depicts some of the traditional norms and social realities that existed at the time, with the 'untouchable' taboos and rules, and the people's ways of navigating between these rules. The Kochamma family business, 'Paradise Pickles and Preserves', is symbolic of this state, as Ayemenem is almost pickled in its customs. Time is chosen to coincide with the beginning of communism, as it

begins pushing its way through, heralding the end of these rules and taboos, the end of a traditional era.

One such taboo is the relationship between castes. As such, **The God of Small Things** recounts the liaison between an untouchable handyman, Velutha, —"The God of Loss / The God of Small Things." (p. 274), and Ammu, the twins' mother and a factory owner's daughter, and the destructive power of the caste system, the hypocrisy of adults in dealing with it, as well as their savageness and unrelenting judgements.

The book is also about the end of another world, a more intimate world - that of Estha and Rahel and everyone else around them - an end, irrevocably damaging, instigated by a single event, the death of their British cousin, Sophie: the story revolves around the visit of Chacko's ex-wife, and his daughter, Sophie Mol. Tragic events that happen during the visit – the drowning of Sophie, a forbidden love affair, child molestation – alternate forever the course of the family's

life, sending them each off on spinning trajectories of regret and pain. The drama happens when the Big Things weave into the frail, Small Things, destroying them forever: "It really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The Laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much." (p.33)

The consequences of these intertwined events are terrible. Estha at some point stops speaking and isolates himself completely from any human contact; Ammu is ban-

ished from her home and separated from her children. Rahel drifts from one school to another, from one job to another, and similarly drifts into a marriage with a man who she ends up leaving.

Roy's treatment of her story is exceptional; this tragedy isn't recounted as such – the reader has to reconstruct it, comprehend it gradually through the children's perceptions and the constant rotation between past and present. Throughout the book, one can only sense the tragedy, not fully grasping it, which only makes it more dramatic and fascinating.

"It deals with our ability to be brutal as well as our ability to be so deeply intimate and so deeply loving".