

# The God of Small Things



# Arundhati Roy



“My mother says that some of the incidents in the book are **based on things that happened when I was two years old.** I have no recollection of them. But obviously, they were trapped in some part of my brain.”



# Small Things

- What is the god of small things?
- Big God vs. Small God (330)
- Big God—in control of small god



# Small Things

- From the children's perspective
- away from the adult boundaries
- small transgressions



# Small Things

- the structure of the book is a collection of small things -episodic, fragmentary life (page 2)



# Small Things

- Cannot change the big things:
- “. . .instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. . .They had no future .” p. 321

# The Title: Roy's own interpretations

- “To me the god of small things is the inversion of God. God's a big thing and God's in control. The god of small things...whether it's the way the children see things or whether it's the insect life in the book, or the fish or the stars-there is a not accepting of what we think of as adult boundaries. This small activity that goes on is the under life of the book, All sorts of boundaries are transgressed upon....”


(Roy, qtd. in Feng and Liu)




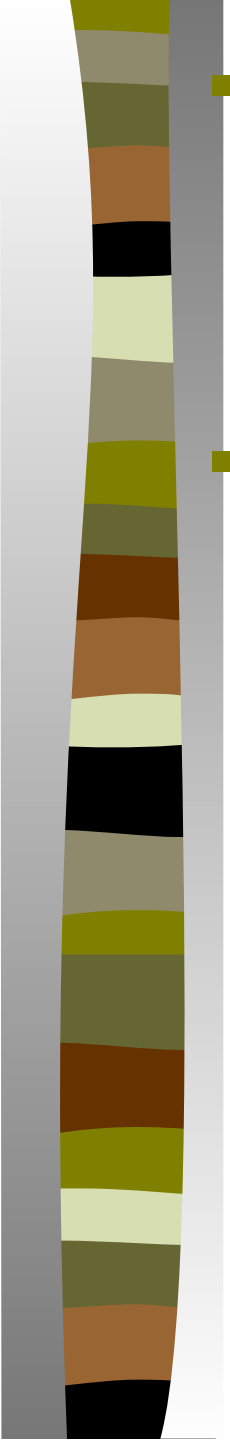
- The title of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has provoked contradictory responses.

- **J. P. Tripathi** thinks the “small things” are “the form of showing affections, doing little things to please others, selflessly or selfishly even”

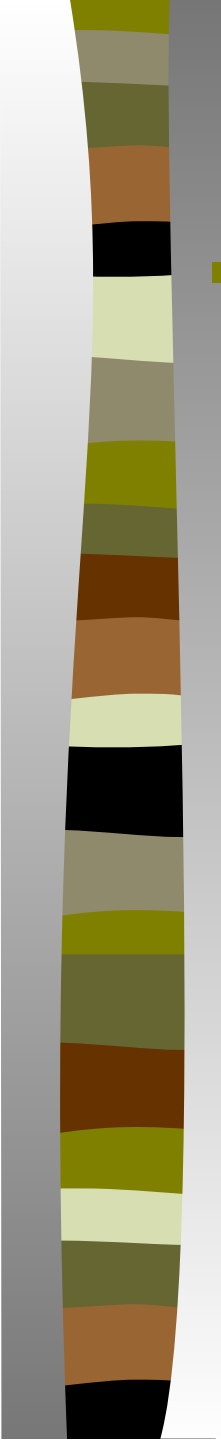


- 
- As for the “God” of the title, **M. K. Naik** asserts:
  - “It is Velutha who gives the novel its title: ‘The God of Small Things’ it is he who is that kind of a ‘god’”

- 
- **Aijaz Ahmad** justifies Velutha's deification:
  - “Velutha is the untouchable carpenter, the maker of little wonders in carved wood and thus ‘the god of small things’” (38).



- **A. N. Dwivedi**, “the small things’ in the title of the novel suggests the fulfilment of sexual hunger, the satiety of physical desires” (“Reversing” 9).

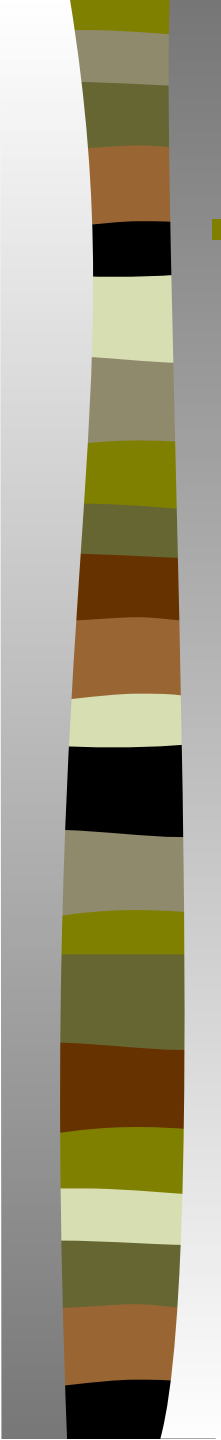


- **S. P. Swain** pushes prurience (excessive interest in sexual matters) to the extreme in equating the “Small Things’ of life” with “the balls, the breast and the soft dark triangle” (149).

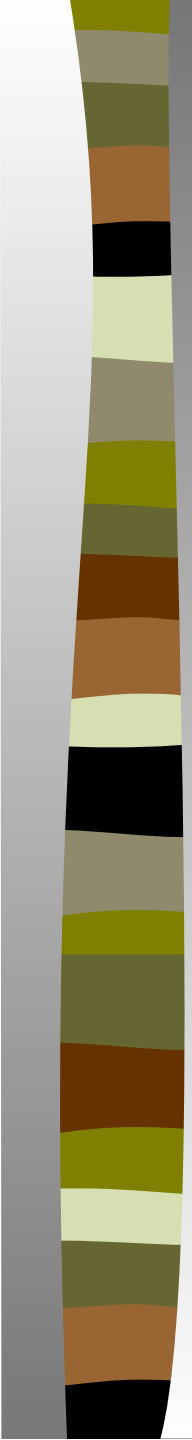


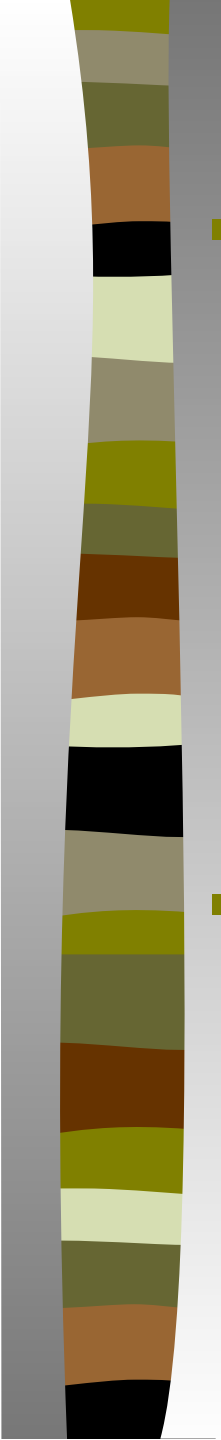
- **M. Mani Meitei** goes to the other extreme –

- educes - Velutha to “the post-Darwinian Freudian God of primitive instinct” (257–58).

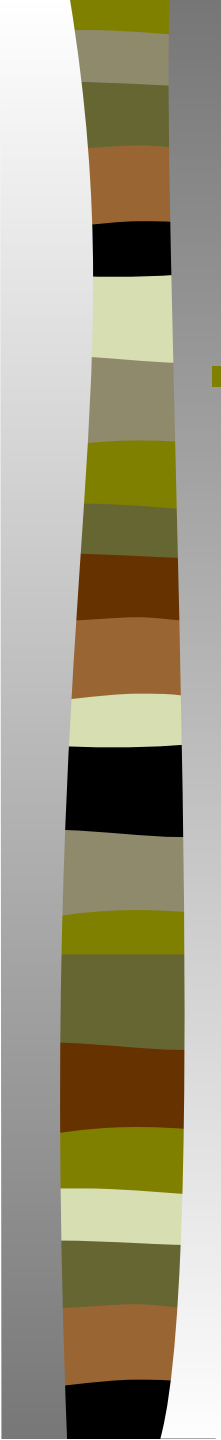


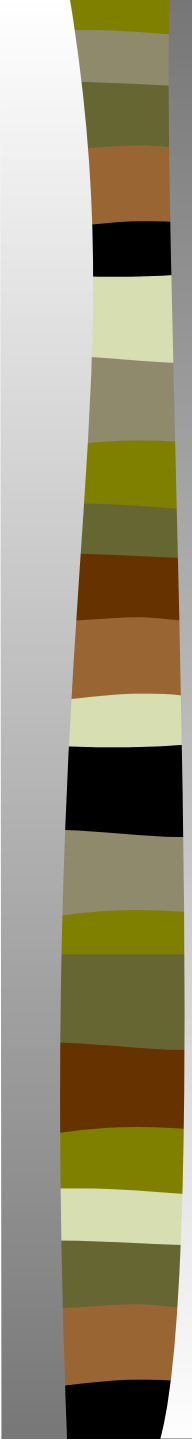
- In contrast, **Urbashi Barat** elevates Velutha to the membership of “the Little Gods of the Hindu tradition, the deities of folklore and of everyday worship” (71)

- 
- According to **Amar Nath Prasad**, “the book shows a maladjustment between ‘The God of Big Things’
  - (**Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, Comrade Pillai, and Inspector Thomas Mathew**)
  - and ‘The God of Small Things’ (**Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, Estha, Sophie Mol**)”

- 
- **Nazma Malik** too stresses the contradictory relations between the inherently violent modern Indian and Western hierarchies and institutions (the big things)
  - which deny the freedom and dignity of the “small things” to maintain themselves



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- “Roy’s ‘god of small things’, is consciously poised against the God of Big Things, whom she identifies with the collective, the ‘community’” - insists **Tabish Khair**

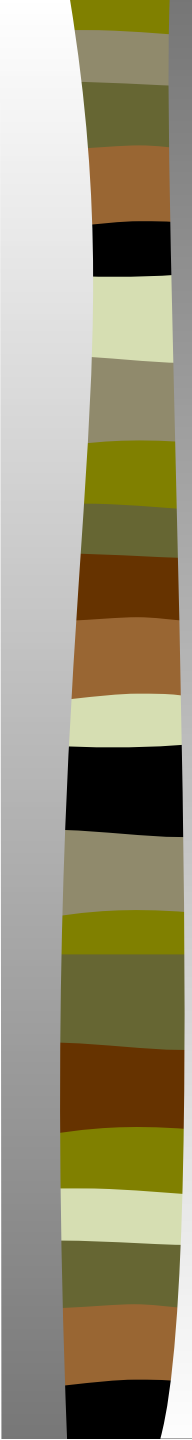


**Jon Mee** - finds that it suggests “the dislocations between the ‘Small God’ of individual lives and the ‘Big God’ of the nation”



- The “Big God” is not invariably an impersonal institution.

- “Big God” may be either an institution or an individual, but it is always a **wielder of tyrannical power**

- 
- In contrast, “Small God” is “cosy and contained, private and limited” (19)
  - He is unimportant, undemanding.
  - He is at once insignificant and indifferent
  - Likewise, “Big Man” is symbolically aligned with “Big God,” “Small Man” with “Small God.”



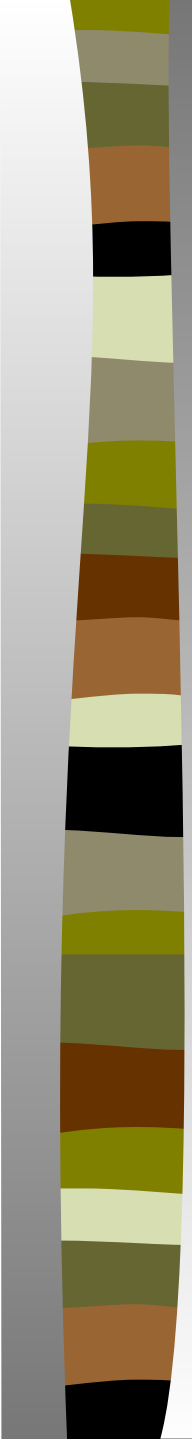
- The **fullest embodiment** of Roy's idea of Small God—


- with his characteristic insignificance

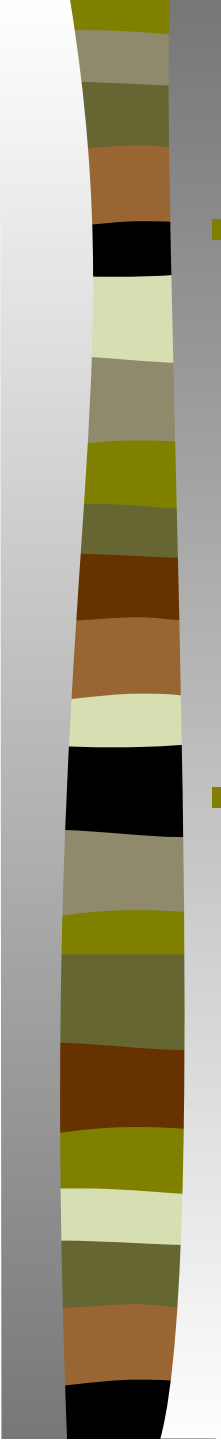
- and insouciance, (lack of concern) with his instinct for

friendship and love—

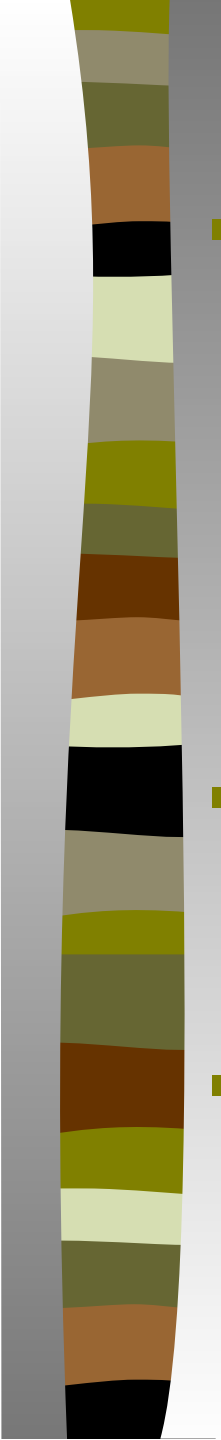
# Velutha


- 
- His love for Ammu causes the loss of his job, his life, Ammu's home, her children, and, finally, her life as well.
  - It also causes the loss of the twins' childhoods
  - He is - many gods rolled into one.

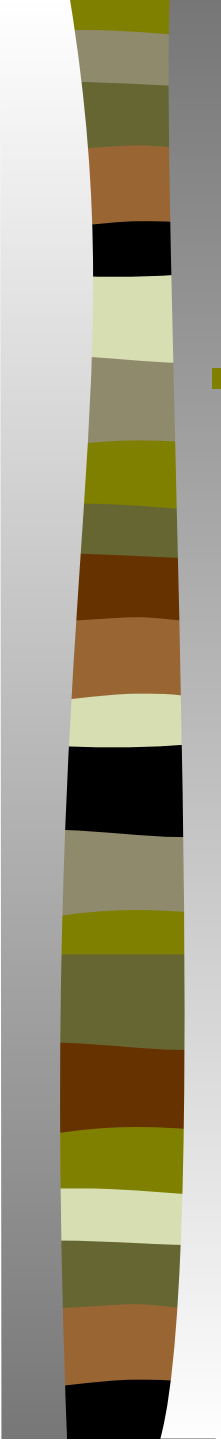
- 
- Ammu finds in him her dream man and anoints him “The God of Small Things” (289)
  - As a marginalised Paravan and a factory hand, Velutha is a social lightweight, a man of no consequence.


- 
- Hence he leaves no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors.
  - He is the “God of Loss” (289)



- 
- What exactly are the small things in this book, and why are they important?
  - a lot of attention to **Sophie Mol's death**
  - one big central event of the novel.

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- The question that keeps coming up is whether Sophie Mol's death was totally random
  - or whether a combination of many smaller events made it inevitable that she would die.
  -

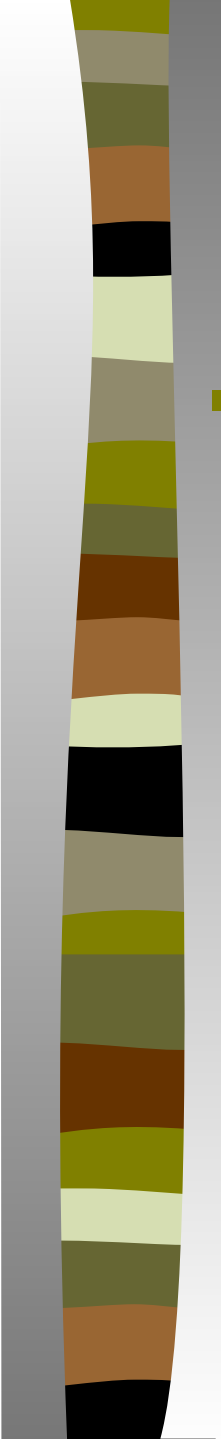
- 
- Maybe it's the small things that cause one big bad thing to happen:

- 
- One small thing Rahel says causes her to worry that Ammu hates her.
  - **all of the small decisions and events** of the novel lead to Estha and Rahel running away from home and bringing Sophie Mol with them, which brings on not only Sophie Mol's, but also Velutha's death.



Velutha is the God of Small Things.

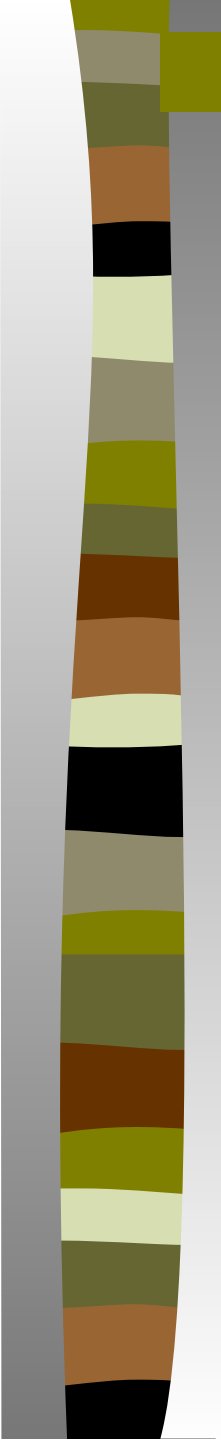

- Velutha and Ammu do not desire anything beyond their self-fulfilling, secret love.
- They have nowhere to go and nothing to look forward to except the hope of meeting “tomorrow.” As a result, “they [stick] to the small things” (339).

- 
- Roy packs all her iconoclasm (the act of assertively rejecting all the cherished beliefs and institutions) into her title by privileging her Small God over society's Big God and above all by making **a god of a subversive lover.**

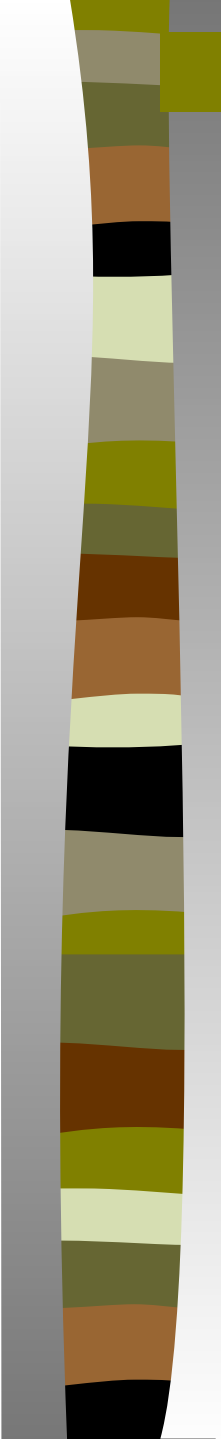


## Biology and Transgression

- “I have to say that my book is not about history but biology and transgression. And, in fact is that **YOU CAN NEVER UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF BRUTALITY UNTIL YOU SEE WHAT HAS BEEN LOVED BEING SMASHED.** And the book deals with both things--it deals with our ability to be brutal as well as our ability to be so deeply intimate and so deeply loving.” (Roy)

- 
- 
- “It’s a story that examines things very closely but also from a very, very distant point, almost from geological time and you look at it and see a pattern there. A pattern...of **how in these small events and in these small lives the world intrudes.**



- 
- And because of this, because of people being unprotected...**the world and the social machine intrudes into the smallest, deepest core of their being and changes their life.”**
  - --a last minute title



# Arundhati Roy-- childhood

- born as Suzanna Arundhati Roy on 11/24/1961
- mother--Mary Roy (Christian)--**a well-known social activist**, ran an informal school (Corpus Chrisiti ) → *strong women in the novel*



# Arundhati Roy-- childhood

- father (a Bengali Hindu tea planter)
- uncle--George Issac (owned the Palat Pickles--the slogan: “Emperor in the realm of taste”) → *Chacko*



# Arundhati Roy--childhood

- 1-yr-old— parents split

→ feeling of insecurity because of the broken marriage; “on the edge of the community”





## Arundhati Roy--childhood

- Age 10 – went to school
- “When I think back on all the things I have done I think from a very early age, I was determined to negotiate with the world on my own. **There were no parents, no uncles, no aunts; I was completely responsible for myself.**”



# Adult Life and Career

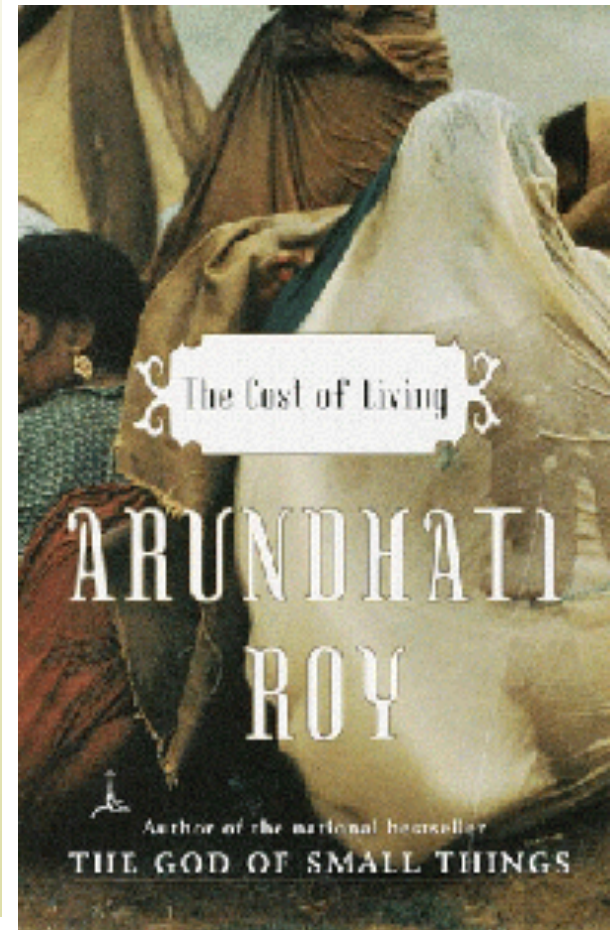
- **Age 16** -- left home and lived in a squatter's colony in Delhi
- The Delhi School of Architecture
- marriage (Gerard Da Cunha)--divorced after 4 years
-

# Adult Life and Career

- First worked with a TV company:
  - a role in *Massey Saab*
  - *The Banyan Tree*--TV series
  - screenplay--*In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones /Electric Moon*
- a critique of *Bandit Queen*, which ended up as a court case. → *concentrates on her writing while working as a aerobic teacher.*

# The God of Small Things

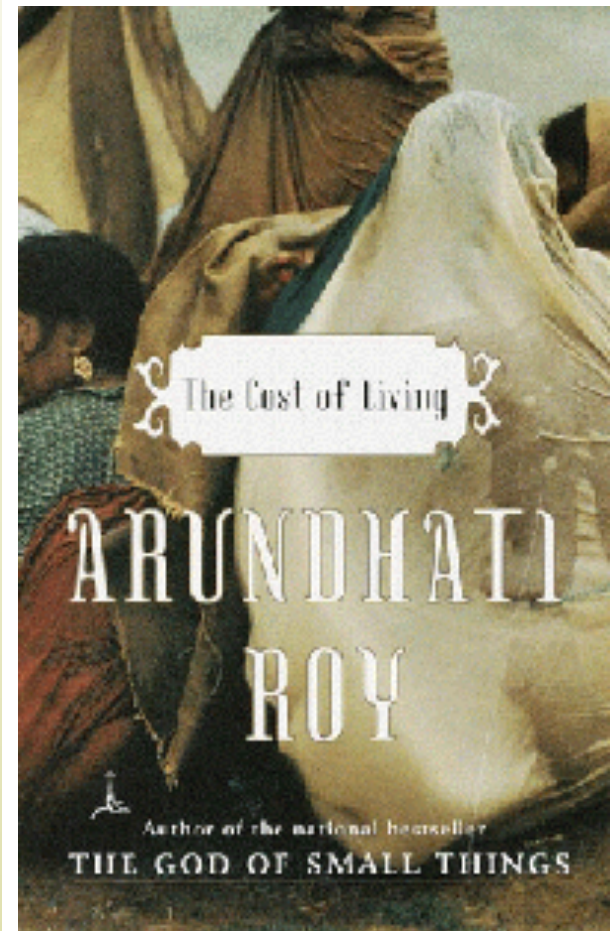
- Completed in May 1996
- published in 4/4/1997 by Random House





# The God of Small Things

- the Booker Prize--Oct. 1997 (India's 50th anniversary of independence)
- --the first non-expatriate Indian author
- and the first Indian woman to win the price





# Arundhati on Writing the Novel

- “so much of fiction is a way of seeing, of making sense of the world...and you need a key of how to begin to do that...”

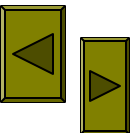


# Arundhati on Writing the Novel

- ... **This** was just a key. For me (the novel) was five years of almost changing and mutating, and growing a new skin. It's almost like a part of me.”
- —but she claimed that she never revised.

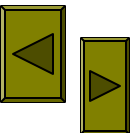
# Controversies

- --communist critique –
- E M S Namboodiripad
  - the depiction of 'Comrade Pillai';
  - sees the novel as anti-Communist campaign



# Controversies

- **obscenity case**--Sabu Thomas (the lawyer who has dragged Roy to court)
  - affront Indian tradition, culture, and morality;
  - “excites sexual desires and lascivious thoughts”; hurts the Syrian Christian community



# Setting: Kerala

## **1. Monsoon rains**

- fill up the rivers
- Kill Sophie Mol.

## **2. Communism**

- democratically elected Communist government
- abolish landlordism





# Marxism in Kerala

“The first Communist government in the world was elected in Kerala in 1957, and from then on it became a big power to contend with. I think in '67 the government returned to power after having been dismissed by Nehru, and so in '69 it was at its peak. And it was as if revolution was really just around the corner.” (Arundhati Roy)



# Kerala: Races

- 60 % -- Hindus
- 40% -- Muslims and Christians ( A small group of Jews)
- → caste system adopted not just by Hindus, but also by people of the other religious groups.





# Syrian Christian Community

- less than 5% of Indian's population
- more than 20%-1/3 in Kerala are Christians (the Untouchables turned “the Rice-Christians” 71)



# Syrian Christian Community

- the Syrian Church is one of the oldest branches of Christianity-- came to India with St. Thomas in 52 CE.



# Influence of Kerala

- “A lot of the atmosphere of *God of Small Things* is based on my experience of what it was like to grow up in Kerala. Most interestingly, it was the only place in the world where religions coincide, there is **Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam** and they all live together and rub each other down.





**IS FLOOD PLAYING THE ROLE OF UNITING PEOPLE  
ACROSS THE COUNTRY ??**

**Attukal Pongala celebrations  
in Kerala: Mosques, churches  
open gates for Hindu  
devotees**



P S Gopikrishnan Unnithan  
Thiruvananthapuram  
March 3, 2018 | UPDATED: March 3, 2018 23:36 IST



Photo from Facebook/Attukal Pongala Mahotsavam 2018;  
Thousands throng Attukal Bhagavathy temple in  
Thiruvananthapuram



# Influence of Kerala

- When I grew up it was the Marxism that was very strong, it was like the revolution was coming the next week.... To me, I couldn't think of a better location for a book about human beings.”



# Allusions to the places in Kelara: History House & Ayemenem House

- 'History House of Kari Saippu'
- Built by a Protestant missionary Baker



- Puliampallil House –the school Arundhati's great-grandfather found.
- (pp. 4, 30)



# The God of Small Things: Characters





■ Rahel Ipe

■ Esthappen Yako Ipe (Estha)

■ Ammu

■ Navomi Ipe (Baby Kochamma)

■ Chacko Ipe



■ Mammachi

■ Sophie Mol

■ Velutha

■ Shr Benaan John Ipe (Pappachi)

■ Margret Kochamma



- Kochu Maria

- Vellaya Pappen

- Comrade K. N. Pillai

- Baba

- Inspector Thomas Mahtew

- The Orangedrink Lemondrink man



■ Kutapen

■ Lenin Pilliai

■ Father Mulligan

■ Larry McCaslin

■ Joe

■ Urmban

■ Kari Saipu

- 
- Rev. E. John Ipe (Punnyan Kunju)
  - Dr. Verghese Verghese
  - Miss Mitten Muralidharan
  - Comrade E. M S Namboothipad
  - Kochu Tomban



# Women in Kerala

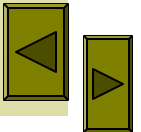
- Relative freedom for women in Kerala
- assertive, energetic, courageous women
- instances of patriarchal oppression



# Mammachi, Ammu & Baby Kochama

# The Love Laws/ Caste System

- p.33 “That 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.”







# The Love Laws/ Caste System

- caste is “the defining consideration in all Indian politics, (and) in all Indian marriages...”

# Displacement and loss

- The twins' routes of migration
- Estha: Assam—Ayemenem—Calcutta  
(Returned)—Ayemenem (re-Returned)  
quietness pp. 12-

# Displacement and loss

- Rahel: Assam—Ayemenem (3 expulsions)—Delhi—Boston (married to Larry McCaslin)—New York—Washington, D.C.—Ayemenem emptiness/ p. 20



Portrait of EMS



