CHAPTER– II

THE LIFE AND WORKS

OF

ARUNDHATI ROY

AND

NAMITA GOKHALE
The second chapter deals with the life and works of Arundhati Roy and Namita Gokhale.

**ARUNDHATI ROY:**

Arundhati Roy is a famous Indian English writer. She is a novelist, screenplay writer, essayist and activist. As a novelist, she received the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 for her first, and only novel *The God of Small Things*.

Arundhati Roy was born is Shillong, Meghalaya, India on 24th November 1961. Her father was a Bengali tea planter and mother, a Keralite Syrian Christian. She spent her childhood in Ayemenam, Kerala, and went to school at Corpus Christi, Kottayam, followed by her education at the Lawrence School, Lovedale in Nilgris, Tamil Nadu. Roy then studied architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi. Roy married Gerard da Cunha, an architect. Unfortunately the couple could not live together for long. They divorced.

Arundhati Roy married Pradip Krishnen, a filmmaker in 1984. She played a role in his award-winning movie *Massey Sahib*. She worked in various jobs. She is a cousin of media personality Prannoy Roy, the head of the leading Indian TV media group NDTV. She lives in New Delhi.

*The God of Small Things* received the best possible admiration from across the world. *The New York Times* called it ‘a dazzling first novel;’ the *Los Angeles Times* said it is ‘a novel of poignancy and considerable sweep;’ the *Toronto Star* called it ‘a lush, magical novel;’ and John Updike observed “A Novel of real ambition must invent its own language, and this one does.…” The novel was one of the five best-sellers in 1997.

The novel however, did not receive good criticism in England as well as in India. Carmen Callil, a 1996 Booker Prize judge called it ‘execrable’ and *The Guardian* called the contest ‘profoundly depressing! Indian critics particularly C. D. Narasimiah called it profane. E. K. Nayanar, the then chief Minister of Kerala charged it with obscenity. Critics smelt religious lobbying behind the award.
Set in Kerala, the novel’s action moves in the latter part of the 20th century, dealing with two forms of transgressive sexuality. The 1990s action opens with the twins Estha and Rahel being reunited in their home-town of Ayemenem. In their childhood they have thought of themselves as a ‘single unity,’ but they have been separated and have lived elsewhere for over two decades: Estha, who has retreated into silence, in Assam; Rahel in the USA. The 1969 action opens on a day when the seven-year-old twins are being taken to the airport to meet their cousin Sophie Mol, who is arriving from England. Gradually the mysteries surrounding the events that have separated them are unravelled: their mother, Ammu, has broken caste taboos by having an affair with an ‘untouchable,’ while the twins have been unintentionally involved in the drowning of Sophie Mol. In the later action, the twins’ intense feelings for one another are consummated in a moment which transgresses ‘the Love Laws.’ The novel’s intricate timeshifts show how individual lives are affected by ‘History,’ but it finally argues for the superior power of ‘Biology.’ Written in a style that makes extensive use of neologisms, it can be seen as a novel in the tradition of G. V. Desani’s *All About H. Hatterr* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children,* a work which through its linguistic inventiveness and resistance to constant conventional classifications, both social and formal, has expanded the range of Indian
fiction in English. John Berger remarks “Never again will a single story be
told as though it’s the only one”\textsuperscript{2} in regard to Arundhati Roy’s \textit{The God of Small Things}.

A similar struggle to fashion female autonomy in the context of
received narratives faces Ammu, the heroine of \textit{The God of Small Things}. Roy’s heroine, who shares Roy’s regional and religious background, is a
divorced struggling against the fate laid out for her by convention: ‘She was
twenty-seven that year, and in the pit of her stomach she carried the cold
knowledge that for her, life had been lived. She had had one chance. She
made a mistake. Having already transgressed community boundaries
marrying a Hindu, she compounds the mistake by taking a chance across the
boundaries of caste and falls in love with Velutha, a paravan. Like \textit{A Thousand Faces of Night}, Roy’s novel places its heroine’s story in the context
of traditional Hindu narratives. The ferocity of the policemen who beat
Velutha, her lover to death is foreshadowed by a description of Bhima’s
beating of Duhshasana; the policemen regard Veluta’s relationship with the
high-caste Ammu as a parallel to the unrobing of Draupadi by Duhshasana
in the \textit{Mahabharata}. Roy shows how such traditional narratives close off
possibilities for women, but it is not only against Indian tradition that
Ammu and her foreign-returned daughter (the novel’s narrator) must
struggle to define themselves. Jon Mee observes, “Narratives of colonialism and westernisation play their own parts in shaping the choices facing these women. If sometimes this novel seems a little unsubtle in the way it handles such allusions, it does provide a powerful imaginative statement of the way people can find themselves trapped outside their own history. Roy’s romance plot, as so often is the case with recent Indian writing in English, stands in a self-consciously uneasy relation to the larger story of the nation.”

‘Something happened,’ writes Roy, ‘when the personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of a vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation.’ Just as the narrator of The Shadow Lines of Amitav Ghosh struggles to find a record in the national press of the riot that was a tragedy for his family, so Roy’s novel records the dislocations between the ‘Small God’ of individual lives and the ‘Big God’ of the nation.

Arundhati Roy is also an essayist. Such of her books are many up to date. Her book We Are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples (2009) explores the culture of peoples around the world. Her book The Cost of Living (1999) is a critique of Indian government’s nuclear policies. Her other works include An Ordinary Persons Guide to Empire (2005), The

Arundhati Roy’s Screenplays and Movies:

Early in her life Arundhati Roy worked for TV and film. She wrote the screenplays for In Which Annie Gives it those Ones (1989), a movie based on her experience as a student of architecture in New Delhi. Her second husband directed it. She also wrote Electric Moon (1992). She criticized the locus standi of Shekhar Kapur’s film Bandit Queen based on Phoolan Devi. In her article ‘The Great Indian Rape Trick’ she accused Kapur misrepresenting Devi’s life. Roy’s recent screenplays are The Banyan Tree and the documentary Damage: A Film with Arundhati Roy (2002)

Arundhati Roy as an Activist:

Arundhati Roy is a great social activist. She is an environmentalist, a political analyst, a critique of terrorism, and international relations, a supporter of minority cultures, and so on. Since the fame and money she got for her only novel The God of Small Things, she began all this, including her screenplay writing and starring in documents. The following is a brief yet critical analysis of her advocacy and controversy.

As an environmentalist, Arundhati Roy works with Medha Patkar, another famous environmentalist. Both Roy and Patkar worked against the
Narmada Dam Project, arguing that the dam will displace half a million people, with little compensation for the victims. She donated her money from Booker Prize for the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and starred in Frany Armstrong’s *Drowned Out* (2002), a document on the project. The Supreme Court, Gujarat Govt, Ramachandra Guha and Gail Omvedt, all have criticized Arundhati Roy’s act of this strongly.

Arundhati Roy wrote the book the *End of Imagination* (1998) criticizing India’s act of testing nuclear weapons in Pokhran, Rajasthan.

Arundhati Roy raised questions about the investigation into the 2001 Indian Parliament attack and the trial of the accused. The Bharatiya Janata Party criticized Arundhati Roy rightly for her support of terrorism. Mostly she wanted publicity.

In 2003 the Adivashi Gothra Maha Sabha, a social movement for adivasi land rights in Kerala organized a major land occupation at the Muthanga Wild Life Reserve in Kerala. The act turned into violence, and Arundhati Roy wrote to the Kerala Chief Minister, ‘You have blood on your hands.’

Arundhati Roy reacted to 2008 Mumbai attacks rather badly. She thinks Muslims do so with Hindus because of Gujarat violence in 2002, and the on-going Jammu and Kashmire violence. She warns against war with
Pakistan and supports Jammu and Kashmir’s separatism. Salman Rushdie attacked her for this. So did Tavleen Singh calling her act hysterical.

Naxalism is a big problem in eastern Indian states Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar and West Bengal. Arundhati Roy criticizes India’s war on the Naxalite-Maoist insurgents in India, calling it ‘war on the poorest people in the country.’

Arundhati Roy’s advocacy for man’s total welfare is not confined to India only. She is very active outside India as well. She is concerned with Islamic issues as much as Kashmir issue. In a 2001 opinion piece in the British newspaper *The Guardian* Arundhati Roy responded to the US military invasion of Afghanistan, finding fault with the argument that this war would be retaliation for the September 11 attacks on New York. She disputes US claims of being a peaceful and freedom loving nation.

In August 2006, Roy along with Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn and others, signed a letter in *The Guardian* called the 2006 Lebanon War, a ‘War Crime’ and accused Israel of state terror.

Arundhati Roy is quite world famous today. As Khuswant Singh would speak of Nirad Choudhaury that Choudury would get publicity for a good or bad cause, Arundhati Roy is claiming that. She has got so many awards since 1997 Booker Prize. In 2002, Arundhati Roy won the Lannan Foundation’s Cultural Freedom Award for her work about civil societies that are adversely affected by the world’s most powerful governments and corporations. Arundhati Roy was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize in May 2004 for her work in social campaigns and her advocacy of non-violence. In January 2006, she got the Sahitya Akademi Award for her collection of essays *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*.

**NAMITA GOKHALE:**

The other Indian English writer Namita Gokhale is from the north, if Arundhati Roy is from the South. Gokhale is from the foothills of the Himalayas. She was born in 1956 in Lucknow, and she grew up in New Delhi and Nainital. Actually he belongs to a family in Kumaon, today in Uttarakhand. She had her education in New Delhi. She served in some college to begin her social life. Then she married a certain Rajiv Gokhale. Then she joined journalism, she edited the film magazine *Super* in Bombay in the 1970s.
It is natural that Namita Gokhale entered the field of writing as a powerful means of empowerment. She began to write fiction, particularly novels. Her first novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* in 1984 became a best seller. *Paro* is a satire on the elite of Bombay and New Delhi.

The novel is known for its frank treatment of sex and libertine behaviour. Critics view it as a feminist document.

Khuswant Singh serialized it in his *Weekly*. He appreciated Gokhale as he appreciated Bapsi Sidwa from Pakistan. Gokhale then lost her husband, and faced much existential crisis. She fell ill often. All this is explicit in her later fiction. Her next books are *A Himalayan Love Story*, *Gods, Graves and Grandmothers*, *The Book of Shadows*, and *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*. Gokhale has also attempted two books of non-fiction. *Mountain Echoes* deals with the Kumaoni way of life, and it is a collection of memoirs of four distinguished women. Gokhale’s next book *The Book of Shiva* introduces Shaiva philosophy. Like R. K. Narayan, she has retold the Indian grand narrative *The Mahabharata*. Her latest work is *In Search of Sita – Revisiting Mythology*. She has written biographies of R. K. Dalmia and others.

Namita Gokhale is a social activist. She has conducted two memorable writer’s retreats in Landour for Roli Books. She is concerned
with showcasing and translating the best of Indian women’s writings as Shobha De does in Bombay. She is concerned with the vibrant Bhasha language of the Indian sub-continent in a creative dialogue with other writers in the world. She is one of the founder directors of Yatra books which co-publish with Penguins in Hindi, Urdu, Marathi and other Indian languages. This is a fine cultural project in modern India.

Mrs. Gokhale began the famous International Festival of Indian Literature, Neemrana 2002, and also The Africa – Asia Literary Conference 2006. Gokhale has worked on groundbreaking workshops on Translating Bharat and Textile Narratives with Siyahi, a prominent literary consultant. Gokhale is a founder – director of the Jaipur Literature Festival along with the English author William Dalrymple.

Namita Gokhale’s first novel Paro: Dreams of Passion (1999) presents the story of an uninhibited, outgoing, irresistibly harmin g woman who knows her assets and calculatedly makes full use of them for enslaving the males. Paro’s sexual encounters with men become both a means of asserting the power of her femaleness and an exercise in defining herself. She is driven by a subconscious urge to be herself, to discard the constraints that a patriarchal cultural set up imposes on woman to conform to the image constructed and perpetuated by the male. A characteristic feature of the
typically male society is a casual attitude towards adultery by the male but a strict censoriousness for the females who lead a promiscuous life. Adultery in woman is unpardonable and an adulterous woman is treated as a moral blot on society. It is this hypocrisy and these double standards which Namita Gokhale seems to be attacking by making Paro travel from man to man as a seductive temptress. May it be the author taking revenge on male society? Paro has sexual liaisons with a series of men like Bubu, Bucky Bhandpur, the test cricketer, Lenin, who is a son of a Marxist Cabinet Minister, Shambu Nath Mishra, a fat and ugly creature, Loukas Leoras, a homosexual and Suresh, Priya’s husband. Gokhale ostensibly replicates the male norm of climbing the social ladder by using woman as crutches; Paro, as an ambitious individual, does exactly the same. She makes use of her body and beauty for her empowerment. Gokhale invests Paro with masculine traits, such as determination, courage, and competitiveness. It is said, “Paro fits into the mould of a pretty woman seized by what Jung called the animus that is why she is headstrong and her opinions have the character of solid convictions.” Through Paro, the novelist subverts the prototypical role-model for women in society which visualizes women inside the house. Subhash Chandra believes that “Paro’s passion and apparent promiscuity become emblematic of the struggle for liberation from the constricting
socio-cultural environment which binds woman to the societal taboos and impinges on her self.”

R.S. Pathak observes, “Paro becomes the ‘symbol of and prototype of emancipation and individuality.’”

Gokhale’s second novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994) has a similar theme. The novel deals with what we can call radical feminism. In this novel, not only does Mrs Gokhale present a gyno-centric view of the world, but also makes women characters self-dependent and empowers them to grapple with the hostile social reality. Women clearly occupy the centre-stage in the book, but what is more significant is that they are not frightened by the wily, devious, and domineering males they come into contact with. They eminently succeed in carving a niche for themselves in the male-dominated society, and prove that what man can do woman can do. They turn themselves into subjects performing acts and desiring men and things. They define themselves. The cover page records that, “The novel is a gripping and enthralling book that wears its many complexities lightly. It will continue to haunt its readers long after they have put it down.”

The plot of the narrative is as follows: The young girl, Gudiya and her Grandmother suffer from adverse strokes of destiny and are rendered homeless. They are compelled to construct a Jhuggi in a lane for shelter. The old woman (referred to as Grandmother) whom Gudiya calls Ammi, has.
positive outlook about life and she succeeds in erecting a makeshift temple under the peepal tree behind their jhuggi. The temple becomes the source of their livelihood, when they are paupers. The fact that they are Muslims does not deter Ammi from appointing herself as the priest of the temple in order to collect and use the offerings. One old woman (Lila) belonging to a family of singing prostitutes puts her melodious voice to good use for singing enchanting bhajans which create a group of dedicated devotees who regularly visit the temple. Slowly, the number of devotees increases and the proceeds increase. Phoolwati, another woman joins the group, and the four of them-- Ammi, Gudiya, Lila (a staunch follower of Ammi) and Phoolwati -- create a world in which women live without any constraints. They live by themselves. It is seen that the men who disturb them will have bad luck. It is said, “It is, thus, to be noticed that women in Gods, Graves and Grandmother (i) are endowed with well-defined identities, (ii) possess stronger personalities than Paro, (iii) have tremendous innate resources to grapple with the crises of life unlike Paro and, (iv) succeed in establishing an alternative mode of life, as against Paro’s failure to do so. Gokhale goes further in her later novel inasmuch as she comes up with a bolder perspective on the possibilities for women, their gender constraints not withstanding. Women in Gods, Graves and Grandmother are an extension of
Paro, and become Paros who are successful and satisfied and affirmative in their attitude to life."

*A Himalayan Love Story* (1996) is about the passion of love. A young girl yearns to fulfill her sexual desires, only to find that the source of her childhood affections is not really the person with whom she will spend the rest of her life. Neither does she finally end up marrying somebody that she fancies. But then life carries on and Parvati, the protagonist faces a near ruin. Finally her life takes a turn, when her husband dies and she is left with the task of bringing up her daughter Irra. An old lover Mukul Nainwal revisits her and having made it good, finds that he cannot absolve himself from some of the responsibility that his bonds with Parvati tie him down. Even as he tries to help her daughter, he is torn between his loyalties. The story is told in two parts. Parvati is the beginner. She tells us about her deprived childhood in a reasonably civilized part of the Himalayan foothills. Her father dies young; her mother suffers. The girl child is the narrator in the beginning of the novel and the whole text has chapters. Unlike *Paro*, *A Himalayan Love Story* is about an elusive love as the former is about woman’s emancipation. The novel is not quite effective. Much of the story is about lust though the characterization is life-like.
Mountain Echoes (1998) is a book of reminiscences of Kumaoni women of celebrity. As India celebrates fifty years of Independence, Roli Books decided to focus on works of historical and contemporary relevance on themes that have hitherto remained neglected. These micro studies would not be confined to the scholarly community. Mountain Echoes is an evocative recollection of life in the Kumaon hills, through the eyes of four talented and highly individualistic women, all in or approaching their eighties. Witness to the transitions and paradigm shifts of the century, their testimony, affirms the strength and vitality of Kumaoni culture and its tradition. This is a fascinating document of change and continuity, recounted with wit, humour and honesty.

The Book of Shadows (1999) deals with autobiographical elements. Indeed, The Tribune observes, “The novel is a chronicle of displacement, strangeness and exile, of forbidden passions and family histories told in a sensual, descriptive style…The Book of Shadows is a compelling story.”

Namita Gokhale’s works are full of passion and description. Her uninhibited self is projected in her entire writings. Although she had a passion for literature, it is ironic that she could not fulfil her dream to study English literature. Before the ‘unfortunate incident in college which ruined her academic career, she was ‘a really serious literature student. She even
wanted to get a PhD and teach English literature. Great writers like Dickens, Dostovosky and Muriel Spark have influenced her. Her affinity to literature whether English or regional, comes through her novels.

: References : 

1. John Updike quoted on the cover Page of *The God of Small Things*. 


