In the preceding chapters we discussed the three early works of Arundhati Roy viz. *The God of Small Things*, *The End of Imagination* and *The Greater Common Good*. While the first is a creative work which stormed the creative world by bagging the Coveted Booker Prize at its maiden appearance, the remaining two are essays which focus on the 'common cause' issues which have become so popular these days concerning nuclear proliferation and the callous play of the influential 'dam-building lobby' of the West coming to the underdeveloped or developing nations of Asia and Africa. The three however, have one thing in common i.e. acute concern for the socio-political realities prevailing in India on the regional or national levels. In other words, Arundhati Roy's works are marked by an acute awareness of socio-political issues seen in a historical perspective. Now since fiction by the very nature of its form allows greater freedom to the writer for voicing his or her views of the historical process out of which the social realities take their shapes and forms, it is proper on our part to discuss the novel in terms of social and historical perspectives so
that we can formulate our own view of the writer's vision of her 'world' and only then shall we be able to evaluate the novel as a work of art.

Our decision to do so has been necessitated by the circumstantial imperatives. While there is no doubt that the novel "is a deeply moving tale characterized by excellence in artistry, social insight and poetic fervour," it is marked by an intense intellectual debate among the writers of diverse political denominations. It may be recalled that the book generated a lot of heated and very often rancorous quarrels among the critics belonging to the opposite camps of CPM and CPM (ML) about the authenticity of the presentation of the socio-political truths in the novel involving such dignitaries as E.M.S. Namboodripad in the Ganashakti on one hand and Kalpana Wilson and especially Suneel in his highly polemical review article in Hindi Samkaleen Lokpaksh on the other.

The above dispute may not be of much purpose for us but it is a valid pointer to the fact that The God of Small Things is concerned with the social issues and that for a proper appreciation of the novel as a work of art we must look into the work to find out how the writer has presented the reality. After all it is an established truth that the novel in some measure 'is a slice of life' and that the success of a novelist depends on his capacity for creating a sense of 'verisimilitude' with life around. In any novel of the third world countries there is much that crowds the mind of
a sensitive writer and it is natural for him to fall back upon the social and historical realities which influence the words and deeds of his or her artistic world. The ‘triad’ of Race, Moment and Milieu is even now relevant especially in the case of Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. Even if we accept that the post-modernist demolition of staid values have made the factor of ‘race’ irrelevant, the socio-historical realities or the moment and the milieu are too powerful to be shaken by the blast of globalization and post-modernist demolition drive. In the novel even race plays a crucial role. Prof. R.S. Sharma’s observation that the socio-political milieu of Kerala provides some flesh to the otherwise skeletal story of the twin needs a little modification. The historical outcome of the socio-economic realities of the Kerala Syrian Christian community serves not to provide ‘paddings’ to the plot but to give the special tone and temper to the novel. Kalpana Wilson’s defense against the attack of Aizaz Ahmad on Arundhati Roy says it explicitly:

In terms of Roy's approach to the left, the fact that the novel focuses in an individual acts of resistance does not automatically imply, as Ahmad suggests, that the author (Roy) is expounding a fully-fledged ‘sabaltem’ theory in which wider organized forms of resistance, class struggle, and the possibility of it is an ever-present backdrop to the event of the novel.

Apart from the polemics of who is the communist and who is not, the statement leaves us in little doubt about the urgency of social realities depicted in the novel.
The historical perspective likewise is an integral part of the design of presenting the pervading reality. The Booker Prize citation itself declares that in her novel "Roy funnels the history of South India through the eyes of a seven-year-old twin." Despite her assertion, in her interview to Ranga Rao that her book is not "about history..."⁴, it is easy to surmise that the book presents the Kerala society of the '60s when the atmosphere was changed because of the dismissal of the Communist State Government by the Centre. Even though the novelist denies any sociological history to be there in the book: "It is my book, it's a story"⁵, the fact remains that the period of time during which the action of the novel unfolds itself, there was much that the enlightened cosmopolitan mind of the novelist could not accept as humane. The caste and class distinctions which the communists profess to shun were too entrenched to be shaken by the glossy ideological Marxism. True it is that the children whose story is the basic story of the novel, are too young to understand the extreme humiliation of the untouchables, but the story of Velutha and Ammu does strike a sympathetic chord in the hearts of the readers. The children's inability to comprehend the issue only makes the story more touching.

We agree that the book is Roy's own story but we also believe that in writing her own story she writes the story of the ground-realities pertaining to the society she comes from. In fact Kerala in the sixties of the preceding century, despite its
educational advancements and social mobility, could not shake off the class and caste considerations fully in the 60s. Even Syrian Christians could not digest the ultimate relationship between a woman of the community and a Parvan. In short the socio-historical perspective not only adds mass to the story but also the human interest which absorbs the attention of the readers. The socio-historical perspective, thus is the natural backdrop to any human drama happening in any Indian state because India was just near a take off stage the natural development of which surfaced beyond the 1980. India of today is far different because of the sweeping post-modernist liberalization. But during the 60s Kerala or for that matter the whole of the Indian sub-continent was passing through a stage which Joan Rockwell calls ‘nodal’ by which she means societies on the verge of sweeping changes. According to her literature at this stage is bound to be extra sensitive to the sociological and historical forces especially if the culture is old and traditional. She makes a valid point for our purpose when she observes:

... Fiction can give us two types of information about society: first, in a descriptive way, facts about the state of technology, laws, customs, social structure and institutions. Second, more subtle and less easily obtained information about values and attitudes. These last become most visible when they are brought to the surface as the themes of literature in nodal periods when great changes are taking place in the basic institutions of society. Changes, for instance, in the structure and formation of the family or of economic life—changes which produce a conflict of values....
The God of Small Things seems to support the above argument. Ammu’s return to the village along with her children is met with hostility and meets its tragic end because of the social and economic tensions which in any earlier times would not have been possible.

Thus it is pertinent to take a look at the socio-historical perspective presented by the novel for a better appreciation of Roy’s artistic achievement as a creative writer. Roy has presented the native scene of her Kerala village with objectivity and compassion. The Syrian Christian were the first to reap the benefits of modern education and therefore they could be well placed in the government jobs at least in the time of her father. She seems to present the picture of disintegration through the image of her father and mother which also reflects in the uncertain lives of other members of the family. Apart from the surface reality which in a way appear without change it is through the use of images and symbols, irony and other such associated tools that she presents the reality. The life in the village in its daily routine ritual and sartorial habits are well presented. We may not find realism of the kind of the established realists but there is enough of the suggestive realism of the kind used by “James Joyce” and Salman Rushdie; (as) without change in The God of Small Things “it employs poetic and symbolic modes along with realistic touches here and there with the limited objective of providing the
social and cultural details characteristic of the persons and groups being dealt with in the novel.\textsuperscript{8}

In order to give a feel of the typical Kerala life Roy writes happily about the style of dressings by various characters. It may be mentioned that she has given the realistic touches by mentioning the difference in the dress of children and grown ups and through the images convey the advancing pace of time. Sophie Mol in her Coffin is wearing “her yellow Crimplene bellbottoms with her hair in a ribbon and her made-in-England go-go bag that she loved (p.4). The dress and hair style of Rahel and Estha communicate the reality rather effectively underlining the historical perspective of change in the conventional social codes of dress and appearance:

Most of Rahel’s hair sat on top of her head like a fountain. It was held together by a Love-in-Tokyo two beads on a rubber band, nothing to do with Love or Tokyo. In Kerala Love-in-Tokos have withstood the test of time, and even today if you were to ask for one at any respectable A-1 Ladies’ store, that’s what you’d get. Two beads on a rubber band. (p.37)

As against the city bred children the local population still bears the conventional dress. The common dress was mundu without any class distinction. Velutha and Comrade Pillai wear mundu only. Roy has keen eyes to notice the change in the dress of women who of late have begun wearing saries instead of mundu and chatta. It is only Kochu Maria who still wore her spotless half-sleeved white chatta with a V-neck and her white mundu,
which folded into a crisp cloth fan on her behind” (p. 170). Thus words like ‘go-go bag’, Elvish puff, ‘Love-in-Tokyo’, ‘A-1 Ladies Stores’, clearly suggest the mobility of the Syrian Christian and at the same time also suggest that the older generation is still following the conventional dress code.

Roy is gifted with a special sense of place as reflected in the presentation of the typical scenes in private or public places. In the very opening chapter we find the pen picture of the vegetable market in Calcutta where Estha used to buy vegetables. While the passage is realism in the essential sense it also says something about the character of Estha:

Vendors in the bazaar, sitting behind pyramids of oiled, shining vegetables, grew to recognize him and would attend to him amidst the clamouring of their other customers. They gave him rusted film cans in which to put the vegetables he picked. He never bargained. They never cheated him. When the vegetables had been weighed and paid for, they would transfer them to his red plastic shopping basket (onions at the bottom, brinjal and tomatoes on the top) and always a sprig of coriander and a fistful of green chillies for free. Estha carried them home in the crowded tram. A quite bubble floating on a sea of noise.” (p. 11)

As a social historian Roy is able to notice the changes in manners and habits which are slowly pervading the placid pace of life and therewith changing the modes of living and thinking. Formerly women usually tended gardens but now the labour-
intensive garden keeping is not possible because of T.V. & Dish antenna:

Baby Kochamma had installed a dish antenna on the roof of the Ayemenem house. She presided over the World in her drawing room on satellite T.V..... It wasn’t something that happened gradually... And in Ayemenem, where once the loudest sound had been a musical bus horn, now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants. And so, while her ornamental garden wilted and died, Baby Kochamma followed American NBA league games, one-day cricket and all the Grand Slam tennis tournaments. On weekdays she watched The Bold and The Beautiful and Santa Barbara, where brittle blondes with lipstick and hair styles rigid with spray seduced androids and defended their sexual empires. Baby Kochamma loved their shiny clothes and the smart, bitchy repartee.” (p. 27)

Arundhati Roy presents a graphic account of the typical Indian cinema hall where a spectator is led to his seat by a torch-bearing attendant. The fans are noisy and the sound of people crunching peanuts with so many smells of breathing people, hair-oil and old-carpets. Stink present the typical scene. Equally graphic is the account of the doctor’s clinic in chapter V where Ammu and Kalyani had taken their children to get foreign objects removed from their noses. This typical Indian scene of a physician providing all sorts of help to the patients is too graphic to be missed:

From behind the doctor’s curtain, sinister voices murmured, interrupted by howls from savaged
children. There was a clink of glass on metal, and the whisper and bubble of boiling water. A boy played with the wooden Doctor is In Doctor is Out sign on the wall, sliding the brass panel up and down. A feverish baby hiccupped on its mother's breast. The slow ceiling fan sliced the thick, frightened air into an unending spiral that spun slowly to the floor like the peeled skin of an endless potato. (p. 132)

A fine example of Roy's keen observation is provided by the description of Paradise Pickle factory which was started by the grandmother of the novelist. Recently it was taken over by Chacko for management but before his arrival to the village it was put into shape and financial viability by Ammu. Chapter 10 describes the visit by Estha and Rahel to the Pickle factory and the realistic details of the recipe books are mixed with the imaginative fancy of the two children. The Pickle smelling atmosphere induces the fancy of the children and Estha will add something to the old recipe book. The crowded atmosphere and the crumpy darkness with the smell of spices and the heap of banana's leaf and cut mangoes in the dark room with low ceiling captures the spirit and the physical reality of a small scale village-factory. The whole chapter is a strange amalgamation of fancy and nostalgia working together upon reality. (see page 93-98)

Roy follows an interesting feature of realistic writing when she presents amusing stock characters and activities of the typical Kerala social setting. The old lady who comes forward to help at Sophi Mol's funeral is one such example. With perfect harmony
she extends her helping hands in performing the last rites: “She put cologne on a wad of cotton wool and with a devout and gently challenging air, dabbed it on Sophie Mol’s forehead” (p. 5). Baby Kochamma and Murlidharan also belong to the group of stock characters whose fixed habits and mannerism create amusement as well as tell something about the social structure which throws up such characters. Roy’s descriptions of realistic details pervades every sphere of human activities and she keenly observes the habits and postures of the concerned person. In the opening chapter itself we find a vivid picture of church while a funeral ceremony is performed according to the customs of Syrian Christian. Within just two lines of descriptive detail Roy is capable of presenting the custom as well as the person as an amused spectator. At once like a spectator as well as an actor: “The priests with curly beards swung pots of frankincense on chains and never smiled at babies the way they did on usual Sundays” (p. 4).

Arundhati Roy’s handling of the social reality is comprehensive enough to extend to the temple elephants and Kathkali performances along with the usual Christian ritual, as mentioned above with perfect ease. In presenting the details of the Kathkali man in chapter 12 she underlines the complete integration of the actor with the stories from the Mahabharata. He regards his stories as his children to be teased, punished, laughed at simply because he likes them. She appreciates the human part
of the stories which are about gods and yet infused with joys and sorrows of everyday human existence. In a very subtle manner she underlines the change of attitude when at the modernized story centers people are mentioned as ridiculing the artist who “checks his rage and dances for them” (p. 231).

*The God of Small Things* is a novel in which the memories of childhood provide the theme, the novelist has presented a glimpse of educational system also. She gives an idea of the elementary education and reading material provided to children in those schools. She seems to emphasise that good education very often depended on family that is why Rahel and Estha read books intended for a higher stage. They could read and write stories and were educated in etiquette by baby Kochamma.

While presenting the story of Syrian Christian community in a Kerala village, Roy is able to comprehend both the past and present. She is aware of the racial memory which is very often recalled with pride and fondness. One such event occurred in 1876 when baby Kochamma’s father was seven years old. The Patriarch was visiting the Syrian Christian of Kerala and baby Kochamma’s grandfather had taken his son to Kochin to see the Patriarch. The feeling of reverence and the eagerness to come close to the Patriarch are graphically described by the novelist:

Seizing his opportunity, his father whispered in his young son’s ear and propelled the little fellow forward. The future Reverend, skidding on his heels, rigid with fear, applied his terrified lips to the ring on the Patriarch’s middle finger, leaving it wet with spit.
The patriarch wiped his ring on his sleeve, and blessed the little boy. Long after he grew up and became a priest, Reverend Ipe continued to be known as Punnyan Kunju—Little Blessed One—and people came down the river in boats all the way from Alleppey and Ernakulam, with children to be blessed by him. (pp. 22-23)

In the above description we learn how incidents become legends and how legends work upon the minds of the people through centuries. In other words, Arundhati Roy is mature enough to capture the social history with its ramification for the present.

As mentioned earlier, the novel created a lot of disturbing ripples in the backwaters of Kerala by its explicit and implicit anti-communism. The ruling party in Kerala found fault with the understanding of Roy about the class and caste conflict in the Kerala Society. Her descriptions led too much acrimony among the communists of different labels. Naturally the book is basically concerned with the plight of the untouchables. The novelist again speaks of the problem synthetically insofar as she tries to read the present situation in the light of the past experiences. She gives us substantial historical information in sociological terms. What is really remarkable is that by presenting only Velutha Roy provides us a fund of historical knowledge which helps us in making a realistic reading of the novel. Roy’s description is not dull because she presents the reality ironically in order to bring out the fineness. We need quoting her in detail:
Pappachi would not allow Paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Caste Hindus and Caste Christians.... Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints.... In Mammachi’s time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas.... When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha’s grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As added incentive they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians. It didn’t take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. They were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour they were even given their own separate Pariah Bishop. After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all. (pp. 73-74)

The above passage brings out the cruel reality that even conversion could not free the untouchables from social segregation as the upper caste Christian just could not imagine having social and marital relation with them. Even Independence brought them little relief as they were being denied even as Christians such benefits as job reservation or bank loans at lower interest rates. It is Roy’s keen historical sense which enables her
to have a synthetic view of history and to reach the conclusion that unless the mind changes nothing is going to happen in the case of the untouchables. Her descriptions help us in understanding the worries of Vellyapaapen regarding the independent airs of Velutha. He could easily sense, despite being illiterate that the sense of freedom which has come with Independence will not make the situation different. He knows therefore that Velutha’s sense of Independence will make the matter worse. Velutha is a young man of new age. He is more skilled than other village carpenters. He is naturally proud of his better craftsmanship which gives him an unmistakable air of independence, self respect and social equality. The novel ends with the perpetuation of hatred towards Parvans and with the establishments of codes of conduct based on caste consideration. The irony is that even the leaders of downtrodden comrade Mr. Pillai becomes instrumental in reducing the stature of Velutha, the better craftsman in the furniture factory and ultimately even in his death by police beatings. Roy thus offers the socio-political history with her ironical punches in which her sense of history helps her in connecting the past with the present. While the descriptions on pp 73-74 bring some betterment in the condition of the untouchables in broad terms nothing substantial comes out.

Roy’s sense of history and of the changes occurring with the passage of time is keenly described in the opening section of the book. She can easily comprehend the changes in the Kerala
Village society which have occurred since the days of Pappachi. She keenly observes the changing landscape of Kerala in the 90's of the preceding century which again bring out the economic disparities. Her observations clearly tell us that now the disparities have taken a new shape. Now instead of the social and traditional disparities, there are disparities caused by poverty or wealth:

Estha walked all over Ayemenem... along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans.... Other days he walked down the road. Past the new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places. Past the resentful older houses tinged green with envy, cowering in their private driveways among their private rubber trees. Each a tottering fiefdom with an epic of its own. (p. 13)

Arundhati Roy uses history symbolically to delineate the social structure based on patriarchal principles which meets opposition today. The plot as well as the characters is steeped in historical reality. The abandoned house where Karisapu committed suicide always comes in the book and the two children call it history house. This house is symbol of evil under the spell of which all characters come at sometime. It is in this house that Ammu and Velutha defy the social code. The house provides shelter when the children are mentally subdued specially when repulsed by Ammu and also after Sophie Mol's death. Similarly Velutha comes to it whenever hurt by the society. He is arrested
from there. The reason for making this house so important for the two children is that they have believed what Chacko has said about history:

> History was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. To understand history we have to go inside and listen to what they're saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells. (p. 52)

There are traces of serious sociological thinking in the novel about the fact of conversion to Christianity. The high caste Brahmins, we are told, were converted by saint Thomas and the result was rather unhealthy. Their sense of superiority prevails and they ended up by feeling segregated. The evil of class distinction based on class continued. Lower caste people converted to Christianity retained their poverty and humiliation even after conversion. It is a common fact that after conversion the Church leave the converted to their own lot because they believe in numbers of people converted and not in life made better after the conversion. For these people even Marxism offer little solace. Comrade Pillai is as great an instrument of torture as the police.

The realistic fiction revels in paying attention to the seamy and shadowy aspects of life. The novelist has drawn our attention to the dirt and filth in the once healthy environment of Kerala. The village river which must have been full in its healthier state is no more than a swollen drain. There is nothing left of its famed grandeur. Roy tells us, “It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon
lawn that ferried fetid... weedy surface like subtropical flying-flowers” (p. 124). The description of the other side of the river reminds us of the filth and squalor caused by haphazard settlement of people along its bank. There is so much of dirt put into the river that “by evening, the river would rouse itself to accept the day’s offerings and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines of thick white scum in its wake. Upstream, clean mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents. People bathed. Severed torsos soaping themselves, arranged like dark busts on a thin, rocking, ribbon lawn” (p. 125). Likewise the filthy situation of the police station at Kottayam is too horrible to recall. The whole room smelled of urine and smoke and it is against this background that we notice Velutha brutally beaten. Probably Roy seems to suggest that the filth around had entered into the minds of the policemen and that is why they behave in the most cruel inhuman manner. This leads us to one basic Indian reality of police atrocity on unfortunate persons without proper connections and patronage. The Indian police is notorious for its ‘third degree methods’ in order to extract confession for a crime not committed by the person detained. Velutha therefore is not an exception to this cruel practice:

His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones were smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lip, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. (p. 310)
Since the novel is presented through the medium of the twin's they have their own perception of the social reality quite logically suggested by the novelist. Plainly speaking, the novelist feels that the society can be divided into two sections of the privileged and the commoners. The former are called Laltains and the later Mombatti. The former is shielded from the forces of oppression as the flame in Laltern is protected by the glass. On the other hand the not so privileged common men and women have no protection like a Mombatti the flame of which flickers and shakes with every gust of wind. By this simple analogy we come to know of Arundhati Roy's basic perceptions of the rural society in Kerala. Her concern for the poor is as acute and as humane as it was in the two essays discussed earlier. According to her party politics and all other doings of the so-called 'great' are to the disadvantage of the poor and the lonely. The Big Dams and the Nuclear weapons serve the vested interest of the city based politicians and money makers. The political party in the village of Kerala professes to be the champion for the common man’s struggle for justice but in reality the old horrors are perpetrated in new forms.

*The God of Small Things* is basically a story of sufferers and the most tortuous suffering is that of social tyranny and almost all major characters namely Ammu, Estha, Rahel, Baby Kochamma and Velutha are victims of the tyrannical social order and in this
social order merit or skill carries no premium. Velutha was a deft mechanic and a skilled carpenter but all these skills simply do not redeem him from the stigma of being an untouchable. Taken objectively Velutha has better human quality but he simply dies despite all those. The Laltains of the society are ensured the best of both the worlds. They are supported by the people who matter and also supported by administration. They are free to give turn and twist to reality. These Laltains are usually cruel and their sole delight is in the torture of the Mombattis. Writing out of personal experiences, Arundhati Roy suggests the difference metaphorically. While Chacko and his family receive a ceremonial welcome with cakes and music there is no such welcome for Ammu and her children. In fact there are many in the Syrian Christian themselves who are as deprived as the untouchables with little right and all suffering. While Kerala has been supposed to be an advance state in matters of health, literacy and education the democratization of village community is still a dream despite the communist rule. The ground reality are so well described and so well presented that communist critics of all political denomination praise her. For example, Kalpana Wilson's observations that the novel powerfully presents a case in favour of progressive forces against the dominant semi-feudal backward capitalist society of India is logical and relevant.
In short we can say that *The God of Small Things* deals with the socio-political reality of the Kerala society of the 60’s of the preceding century rather graphically. Her presentation gets credibility because of her considerable knowledge of psychological realism. To be precise social reality is made to conform to the individual and social, psychological processes. Roy tries to make out the structure of the individual selves of different characters in the light of psychological problems. For example, the impulsive lack of restraint of Ammu is set to be rooted to her upbringing:

> Because Ammu had not had the kind of education, nor read the sorts of books, nor met the sorts of people, that might have influenced her to think the way she did.

She was just that sort of animal. (p. 180)

The major characters who work upon our sympathy suffer from some traumatic experiences and the memory of the trauma is carried forever to make their perceptions and actions far from the normal. The hideousness of the story comes out only when we look in the light of the psychological scars which the characters receive at some time in their lives, so much so that there is no dearth of critics who try to read the behaviour of major characters in the light of trauma psychology. The fear and threat of Estha is directly related to his experience at Abhilash Theatre. Ammu’s intemperate nature was caused by the senseless beatings of her
mother by her father whose violent nature may be attributed to the
shock of not getting credit for the ‘moth’ he had discovered after a
life long research. Chacko’s frivolousness is also attributed to the
maniack history of the family. These psychological reasons make
the social reality still more poignant and that accounts for the
immediate success of novel as a work of art.
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