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Cultural Conflicts, Mimicry, and Hybridity in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the issues like cultural conflicts, hybridity, and mimicry in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) that rose out due to the impact of colonial power, ideology, language and culture. Through the postcolonial approach, I have made analysis of the text and found a clash between cultures such as Hindu and Christianity, Indian and British; hybridity of which fine examples are the twins Estha and Rahel, and Chacko; mimicry represented by Pappachi and Baby Kochamma, and the colonial superiority by Margaret and Sophie Mol. The paper also deals with the psychological, social, and religious impacts of colonialism.

Keywords- Colonialism, Domination, Cultural Conflicts, Hybridity, Mimicry, Identity Crisis.

The present paper aims at presenting postcolonial reading of *The God of Small Things*, a celebrated postcolonial novel by Arundhati Roy. Before we proceed, I think it would be better to see in brief what post colonialism is and what are the characteristic features of it, and what the purpose of this theory? To give answer of these questions before we go ahead, will make our task easier to understand the text fully and better.

Postcolonial as a literary theory appeared in the last decade of the 20th century. As an academic discipline, postcolonial theory focuses on the cultural and legacy of colonialism and imperialism. The word 'postcolonial' itself makes the meaning clear that it is 'after colonial'. Thus it is clear that postcolonial theory emerged after colonial rule and ideology. Colonialism was a process of expansion and exploitation of a territory and of its resources as well as natives. Colonialism emerged out as industrial modernity of European countries like

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Britain, France, Spain, Portugal etc., and these countries made their colonies, which was a brief settlement, in Asian, African, Caribbean islands, and South American countries. This brief settlement started in 15th and 16th century and soon turned into permanent settlement. This colonial process of expansion and exploitation not only affected natural resources of these territories but also affected the natives and their lives, identity, personality, culture, language, ideology, history and literature as well. During anti-colonial struggle, some men of letters and thinkers paid their attention towards colonial domination over the culture, literature, ideology and language of the natives and pointed out racial dimension of the colonial rule. The inequalities of power, slow, steady erosion of natives' values and culture especially of language by colonial rule. In this way, we see an emergence of a new mode to study of the effects of colonial practices over colonized people; this new mode was post colonialism.

Post colonialism or postcolonial studies make critical analysis of the history, culture, literature, and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, France, Spain, and other imperial powers. As P. K. Nayer puts it, "postcolonial theory is a method of interpreting, reading, and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism where it proposes that exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of racially determined power of representation" (Nayer 154).

Postcolonial theory, as a domain within literary studies is both a subject-matter and theoretical framework. As a subject-matter, postcolonial theory analyzes literature produced by cultures that developed in response to colonial domination, and as a theoretical framework, postcolonial theory makes analysis of the operations-whether politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically of the colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies.

Post colonialist critics like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhaba, Gayatri Spivak and others paid their attention on the literature produced during and after of the colonial and imperial rule and made analysis of it from different perspective such as social, political, economic, religious, psychological, and cultural etc. and the worst and fatal impacts of colonial ideology and rule over natives' culture and ideology. Frantz Fanon, who was a psychiatrist, made analysis of colonial practices and ideology from psychoanalytical perspective or point of view and found that colonial power and rule has destroyed the very soul of natives. Edward Said, a Palestinian immigrant American critic, who made analysis of

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the literature of the colonized cultures and their representation in European literature and found that European made them realize that they are naïve, primitive, savage and undeveloped and imposed their colonial culture, language, and power etc. on the colonized people and it resulted that they gradually assumed themselves what colonizers told them, and attracted toward colonizers' culture and ideology thinking that they are civilized and advanced. Gayatri Spivak, a feminist and deconstructive critic raised the destructive effects of colonial power, culture and rule over colonized and especially on women. Homi K. Bhaba pointed out the outcomes of the effect of colonial domination over the natives who resulted in 'Mimicry' and 'Hybridity'.

Arundhati Roy is the most celebrated novelist of India, got most prestigious 'Man Booker Prize' of 1997 for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). The plot of *The God of Small Things* revolves around a Syrian Christian family living in Ayemenem, Kerala. The head of the family is Pappachi, who is an entomologist under imperial rule, living with his wife Mammachi and two children Ammu and Chacko. Chacko, the only son was sent Oxford to study where he marries to a white girl Margaret, and Ammu only daughter deprived from education, once she visits Culcutta and falls in love with a Hindu lad and she marries to him against her parents' will. As we proceed ahead we see that Chacko is given divorce by Margaret while they have a daughter Sophie Mol. Margaret remarries to Joe. Chacko being disappointed comes back India at his home. On the other side we find that Ammu comes back at her parents' home with her twins, Rahel and Estha, after giving divorce to her husband. There Margaret's husband Joe died in an accident; therefore, Margaret and Sophie Mol visit India at Chacko's home. The story of the novel revolves around Estha, Rahel, Ammu, and Sophie Mol's visit to India. The story is occurred from 1969 to 1993, and told in flashback and flash-forward technique. The novel is full of postcolonial features such identity problem, mimicry, hybridity, and subaltern.

Cultural conflict is the chief concern of post colonialism, arises when two and more than two cultures confront at one place where the more powerful culture overlaps others. This cultural conflict can be seen when European colonizers came in colonized nations like India, Arab, South Africa, and South America, they presented themselves civilized, developed, educated, advanced in technology, rational and progressive and treated natives as primitive, savage, half-man, despotic, sensual and backward. And thus they established themselves as

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supreme and superior and stayed there with the pseudo-purpose to make natives civilized and complete man and began to impose their culture and education. As Bill Ashcroft puts, “civilization in decay as manifestation of degenerate societies and races in need of rescue and rehabilitations by civilized Europe (Ashcroft 132).” Thinking European culture best and superior colonized people gradually began to imitate colonizers and the result was that the natives began to see their own culture as primitive and backward. Therefore, native culture began to lose its charm. Thus we see that most of the native cultures changed by cross-cultural contact, and often through military invasion. The best examples of this cross-culture are –

1. The ancient Celtic culture of British Isles changed by the Roman legions
2. The Anglo-Saxon culture was changed by the many generations of French rule.
3. And in present scenario, many cultures of Asian, African, and South American countries changed and invaded by European cultures.

When two or more than two cultures cross to each other, both the cultures are affected by each other. It is obvious that powerful culture always dominant but to some extent it also affected by native cultures. For instance Picasso’s art was greatly influenced by history of African masks. Postcolonial critics marked out the dread effects of cross-cultures, especially on the natives or colonized nations. They began to lose their own native culture, custom, language, and ideology. Their imitation of European culture and language didn’t make them as White and thus they began to lose their identity and began to feel alienated among all.

In *The God of Small Things* (1997), these cultural conflicts can be traced very easily at several places. Here we may see these cultural conflicts at two levels – between the Hindu and Christian culture, and European and Indian culture. As we all of us know this fact that our country is ruled by Britain over the two centuries. During this period, Indian culture not only affected by British culture but also affected the British culture. Britishers used to present themselves superior, civilized, and rich in culture which attracted most of the Indians and they began to imitate them slavishly. Pappachi, who is an entomologist under imperial rule, has imitated them and their language so slavishly that in his family he used to present himself as White. His son Chacko tells the twins Estha and Rahel that ‘Pappachi is an Anglophile.’ Pappachi followed their way of living and manners and used to wear a three piece coat, “Pappachi wore a well prepared three-piece suit and gold pocket watch (A. Roy 49).” This

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gold watch signifies here that how conscious Pappachi was regarding time as Britishers were. Further we see that how rudely Pappachi used to treat his wife Mammachi. He used to beat her daily that is the symbol of British or colonial tyranny which he had adopted. Another impact of British culture, we may see that Pappachi sent his son Chacko Oxford University to study where Chacko makes his best efforts to be White and to some extent he adopted it well. Chacko began to behave like Britishers and he also marries with a British girl Margaret but soon he gets divorce from Margaret which resembles that Chacko is rejected by White because of his lack of 'Self'. Feeling alienated Chacko returns his parents' home in India, at Ayemenem, Kerala. Ammu, daughter of Pappachi, being influenced by Hindu culture, custom, and traditions, gets marry to a Bengali Hindu man and bears twins Estha and Rahel, for him. But after sometimes Ammu divorce him and comes back her parents home with her twins. Though the twins Estha and Rahel are of seven years yet they are very fond of British culture. They love English movie '*The Sound of Music*' and Estha's love for 'Elvis. "Estha loves Elvis. He is wearing his Beige and pointy shoes and his Elvis puff, His special outing puff (A.Roy2. 9)." It is quite evident that they are much influenced by British culture. Thus, we are seeing that almost all the character are deeply fascinated and influenced by the White culture.

One of the most important elements of postcolonial theory is postcolonial identity. As we can see that colonizers painted colonized and their culture and language as primitive, undeveloped, voiceless, and savage and this continuous representation of colonized people as uncivilized and primitive, made them realize that they are really undeveloped and primitive, and this way colonizers imposed upon them their culture, language, religion and codes of conduct forcibly. Hence, we see that colonized people began to adopt White culture and language, and devalued their own native culture, traditions and language and this resulted in identity crisis. Now they became amalgam of two different cultures, neither complete white nor complete native. During the anti-colonial struggle, colonizers had to retreat and left the land once they invaded, in the hands of colonized people, who are now half- white and half-native. As Lois Tyson puts, "This decolonialization has been confined largely to the removal of British military forces and government officials. What had been left behind, that was a deeply embedded cultural colonization" (L. Tyson 419). Nowadays we may see that many people who were formerly colonized speak English, write in English, use English in their

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schools and universities, and conduct governments' business in English, which is the effect of colonial domination on their culture.

In *The God of Small Things*, there are some characters who are very fascinated with the White identity and others are struggling for the complete self. Pappachi is the great admirer of the British culture and language, and consider it, the culture of elite class. Baby Kochamma, the great- aunt of the twins, is also victim of postcolonial identity. When the whole family was at airport to pick-up Margaret and Sophie Mol, we see that Baby Kochamma forces twins to behave like an "ambassador of India" (A. Roy 139). Rahel and Estha's love for Shakespeare and Kipling, make us believe that that they are suffering from the sense of superiority that is postcolonial identity.

Another impact of colonialization is the double consciousness of colonized people that produce an unstable sense of self, which was heightened by the forced migration. During colonialization, people were forced to migrate from one place to another, from small village to city in search of livelihood, and sometimes forcibly as a slave from one colony to another. This process separate them from their homeland, and at new place, they felt themselves alienated and unhomeliness, a feeling in which one feels caught between two cultures, resulted in a psychological trauma of cultural displacement. Unhomeliness is not same as being homeless, Homi K. Bhabha told that unhomeliness is, "To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your home because you're not home in itself" (Bhabha 9).

This feeling of unhomeliness is all pervasive in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Most of the characters in the novel are feeling unhomeliness at even their homeland. Pappachi, who thinks himself civilized and superior, feels sometimes unhomeliness when someone talks in native vernacular, he begins to assume as he is surrounded by savage people. Mammachi's treatment in the hands of her husband reminds her as she is a slave in the hands of exploitative colonizers, and thus for her, she is not at home even in her own home. When Chacko went Oxford to study, there he was suffered from the sense of unhomeliness. Ammu, after divorce comes her parents' home, she was not welcomed by heart and her ill-treatment by the family members especially Baby Kochamma put into her a feeling of unhomeliness. The twins Estha and Rahel, how can they feel at home this was not of their parents' home? After the arrival of Sophie, Rahel's feeling of unhomeliness was at height, and at last of

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novel we see that Estha lives in his own world and don't talk to anybody, and sometimes walk a miles away in rain because he was suffering from the feeling of unhomeliness.

Post colonialist critics like Frantz Fanon, believes that colonialism has deeply affected the psychology of indigenous, which not only destroyed their very soul but identity and personality. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) are very influential work in the postcolonial study, where Fanon exposed the ways colonial psychology acted upon the natives' mind. Fanon told that the colonial master's consistent representation of the natives as non-human and animal annihilated their identity. And thus the indigenous or natives people began to assume themselves as half-human and non-human. Fanon has argued, "For the native the term 'man' itself begins to mean White man because he does not see himself as a man at all. In terms of culture, the natives extend this accepted notion to believe that the only values that matter are those of white man" (Fanon 149). And further it happens that the natives taking on the western values, religion, the language, and rejecting their own which Fanon termed as 'White Masks' over the black skin through which the natives began to experience a 'Schizophrenic' condition as a result of duality. Fanon again argues that this sense of inadequacy (towards White culture) and inferiority (towards native culture) in the colonizer's psyche resulted in violence. This violence was in the form of self-assertion.

The psychological effects of colonialism can be traced in *The God of Small Things*. Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Rahel, Chacko, and Estha all are psychologically affected by colonialism. Pappachi as an entomologist discovered a new breed of moth but he was devastated when he was told that what he has discovered is an old and abnormal species of moth. Later on that breed of moth named after a British scientist. This incident broke Pappachi from inside and destroyed him mentally. Baby Kochamma, who is skilled in gardening, is also affected by colonial psychology. Like colonizers, she feels herself superior and wishes to dominate overall and makes her best efforts to debase Ammu and puts out Ammu from home when it comes to know that she loves Velutha, an untouchable man of lower caste. We see a psychological fear inside of Estha from the orange drink and lemon drink man, who had molested him in cinema hall. The orange drink and lemon drink man is a symbol of exploitation like colonizers. Estha's remarks make clear his psychological fear, when he says, "Anything can happen to anyone. It is best to be prepared (A.Roy 149)." As

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for Rahel's psychological fear, it reflects at the airport, when she feels that the statue of a kangaroo get alive. This is symbolically represented of the arrival of Sophie. As Rahel often thinks that after Sophie's arrival, nobody will love and care her because of Sophie's fair skin color.

Post colonialist theorists argue that the schools that were established by the colonizers to make the natives civilized, that schools were center of colonial ideology. They pointed out that there was a fear inside of colonizers to loss their colonies therefore they established schools to make their prototype, so that they cannot rebel against them and their supremacy. Colonized people were taught English language, culture, and ideology and many other things. Thus colonizer got success in their plan. We see that the colonized people imitated them and their dress, speech, behaviors, manners, and life-style. Post colonialist critic like Homi K. Bhabha refers this activity of the natives as 'Mimicry', and argues that mimicry is the disciplined imitation of the white by the natives. Bhabha looks at mimicry as a site where colonial authority, rather than being reinforced, actually breaks down, because their agenda (what the white men wished) got failed. As Bhabha puts, "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in discussing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha 1). Further Bhabha advocates of the term 'Hybridity' of which Bill Ashcroft explains in this way, "the cross-breeding of the two species by grafting and cross-pollination to form a third, hybrid species (Ashcroft118)." Here Bhabha says that when natives imitated white culture and language, it got mix-up with their own, thus what natives express and behave is a kind of hybridity.

This mimicry and hybridity is very common in *The God of Small Things*, where almost all the leading characters are hybrid and make mimicry of British culture and language. Pappachi, Chacko, Rahel, Estha and Baby Kochamma all represent for mimicry and hybridity. The twins Rahel and Estha are very hybrid and mimic because most often we see them making mimicry of British language and culture. Their recitation of Shakespeare and Kipling very easily mark them as hybrid. Baby Kochamma always behaves herself as White and forces the twins to speak in English and asks them to write hundred times, 'I will speak in English.'

Another most influential critic of postcolonialism is Edward Said, who in his celebrated work *Orientalism* (1978), made analysis of Eastern literature and or Orient

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literature and epistemology and its representation in European literature and found that European has presented oriental reality in a particular ways that were usable and profitable for Europeans. P. K. Nayer viewed Orientalism is a style of thinking, a form of representation that created opinions, ideas, and images of the non-European culture in racialized ways so that (1) the East was always contrasted negatively with Europe and, (2) it justified the colonial presence in the East. Edward Said has made an analysis of colonial discourse and ideology and found that Europeans have created the concepts of 'I' and 'Us' for themselves, and 'Them' and 'Other' for the natives. These concepts we may draw out from *The God of Small Things*. The twins Rahel and Estha in their childhood think themselves together as 'Me' and separately as 'Us', which reflects the influence of colonial discourse on them, but as an adult Rahel and Estha see themselves as 'Them'.

Gayatri Spivak, a feminist and postcolonial critic, who in her well-known essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) has theorized the condition of natives within colonialism and of women in postcolonial state, and told that women and natives are made subjects through the patriarchal and colonial discourse. That's why an individual cannot develop his or her identity without being the subject of discourse over which he or she has no control. She told that this subject is a subaltern within colonial and patriarchal domination. She unfolded that this colonial and patriarchal system or rule has developed two groups or levels in the society.

1- Female and colonized people who were like soldiers

2- Male and colonizers who were like commanders

She has traced this kind of racial difference which was very fatal for one's identity, because it makes people dumb.

We also find this notion of subaltern in *The God of Small Things*. Mammachi, Ammu and Velutha are the fine examples of subaltern. Mammachi is not allowed to speak against her husband while Pappachi used to beat her daily. Ammu and Velutha both are treated as subaltern. They have not their own voice. The inspector Matthew addresses her prostitute and pushes her breasts by rod as he is picking-up orange out of basket. Velutha was beaten by the inspector so mercilessly that put him to death.

Postcolonial theorists argued that social and racial differences were established by the colonizers between the natives and themselves in order to rule over them and maintain their superiority, but this social and racial discrimination was not new in the context of native

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Indians' social and cultural set-up. This discrimination already existed in the Indian society in the form of caste-system. This caste system, as post colonialist critics argued, was the most violent and destructive than the colonial rule and domination.

In *The God of Small Things*, we may see this social and racial discrimination very clearly. Velutha belongs to lower and untouchable, paravan caste. When he was kept as carpenter maintenance in Paradise Pickles factory by Mammachi, then most workers were not happy to see an untouchable in the factory. Further we also see that Velutha and Ammu have incestuous relations, which is a serious crime according to social caste system and code of conduct, which they both have broken. When this secret came out, both the families got fired. Velutha's father is even searching to kill him for the violation of social codes of conduct. Ammu has to be exiled for this heinous crime.

We also see the religious impact of colonialism. Having tired from the caste –system of the Indian society, Velutha's grand-father convert himself into Christianity in order to escape from the social and racial discrimination, what the lower class people were facing under Hindu caste- system.

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