

Women's Place in a Patriarchal Society: A Critical Analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT: *“The truth of art signifies its power to imaginatively inscribe hitherto unknown dimensions of reality”. Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things unfolds a unique dimension of reality in general and Indian reality in particular with ‘extraordinary linguistic inventiveness. Imbued with poetry, her narrative style dismisses the monopoly of ‘established reality’ to define what is real-in a way. Centering on an engaging tale of a cross-caste doomed love between a Paravan boy and a Syrian Christian girl, the novel develops a number of themes to present Indian reality from different perspectives. Apart from the dominant language discourse, socio-cultural and political discourses have been infused into the fabric of the novel to offer a successful rendering of Indian reality. This paper portrays specifically how women are relegated to the status of mere ‘females’ as opposed to ‘males’. Inhuman treatment of women is inbuilt into the standards of behaviour in a patriarchal society.*

KEYWORDS: Cross-Caste, Socio-Cultural, Patriarchal Society, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy is one of the few Indian English writers actively interested in contemporary socio-political issues as is amply evidenced in a number of articles, interviews and books she has written on various topics in recent years. The impact of her novel *The God of Small Things* is all the more significant considering that the author has so far produced only one novel, which won her the Booker Mc Connell in 1997. This was the first Booker Awarded to a non-expatriate Indian woman writer.

The God of Small of Things does not merely transcribe reality, but makes it come alive. Roy renders her varied experience of Indian reality through subjective mental lenses by aptly employing experimental narrative techniques. She views the socio-political situations of South India with ironic detachment but highlights almost each and every incident happening around her with a fidelity to reality which an ordinary eye is prone to miss.

This paper presents specifically the sheer vulnerability of women in the social discourse. Roy’s portrayal of the plight of women in a South Indian setting shocks us into recognition of the fact that the social mechanisms that have evolved over centuries do not allow women to emerge as separate entities that can make a difference. Chandra Talpade Mohanty declares, “the assumption of women as an already constituted coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy

which can be applied universally and cross-culturally". (Mohanty, qtd in Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader 1994) The subjugation of women starts within the family and continues from one generation to another. Women are not allowed to assert their presence; they are cornered, pitied and looked down upon by their male counterparts.

Roy portrays the plights of women in three dimensions. They are:

1. Ammu's suffocating pre-marital stay in Ayemenem, her return with two children to an unwelcoming family and finally her brief affair with Velutha which cuts her life short.
2. Mammachi's extremely disturbed conjugal tie with Pappachi, which results from Chako's attempt to stop Pappachi's regular beating of Mammachi.
3. Baby Kochamma's unrequited love for Father Mulligan and her eventual spinsterhood.

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"..... family is a dominant ideology, through which a particular set of household and gender relationships are universalized and naturalized... and through which unequal power relations are observed and legitimized" (Patricia Oberai. Qtd in *The God of Small Things. A Critical Study*, 2004)

Traditional joint families are neatly structured; in there some women assume the dominant role with greater authority over others. The complex structure is deeply embedded and has given rise to countless stories of personal tragedies of unequally placed women. Their unequal position creates great misery, sufferings and hardships in their lives forcing them to accept the oppressive system in a spirit of religious submissiveness and personal renunciation. The novel portrays the doomed fate of women of contemporary South India whose suffering starts with their discriminatory upbringing and continues throughout their lives. The suppression of women starts in their own house and is a consequence of a family and social mechanism that has evolved over centuries in traditional Indian society.

In the novel every woman suffers in her own way. Right at the centre is the doleful tale of Ammu, mother of Rahel and Estha, whose suffering start in her own house and slowly contributes to her ignoble death. The other two victims of oppression, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, fit into the oppressive family system that blatantly victimizes Ammu. They become her active oppressors, seeking to corner her and then drive her to her miserable death. Rahel, the youngest sufferer among all the female characters, experiences ostracism at home and school which disrupts her normal upbringing. In a country like India, where the patriarchal system is very strong women suffer mentally, physically and sexually.

Ammu is portrayed as a sad character who has been deprived of love and affection since her childhood. As a child, she is much exposed to family violence in the form of Pappachi who exploded every now and then due to his extreme frustration in his professional career. Ammu has been a silent witness to the brutal behaviour of Pappachi with Mammachi. Pappachi is portrayed as a sadist who is delighted in inflicting mental agonies on his wife. Ammu has seen the brutality of masculine power from the early years of her life. She couldn't even save herself from the

heinous cruelty of her own father. Ammu is the victim of Pappachi's male chauvinistic indifference towards the education of women. It is ironical to note that Ammu is deprived of higher education by someone who is a "reputed scientist".

Ammu presents the most pathetic picture of woman who seeks happiness and love in a world that turns its back on her. Having abandoned her husband for his debauched tendencies, and having returned to her family she loses all normal status as a family member and is thrown into a dark corner. Ammu falls prey to the vicious trap set by Mammachi and Baby Kochamma because of her relationship with Velutha. The sheer animosity towards the Untouchables finds double force in the Ammu-Velutha liaison and breaks out into expressions of moral outrage even though Chako's sexual indulgences with low-caste women is overlooked as 'Men's Needs'. This is typical of the double standard of morality practiced in a traditional Indian family. While men enjoy greater laxity and freedom, the family's 'dignity' and 'honour' rest on woman's blemish less moral conduct. Men are privileged, women the cross-bearers!

Ng Shing Yi, a Singapore writer, wrote in the Quarterly Literary Review, "Peripheral Beings and Loss in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" states "The God of Small Things is a novel that carries shades of incipient socialism and feminism, the postcolonial condition is reinforced by the added drawback of being an untouchable or a woman, as Velutha, Ammu. ...are, their marginality is so acute that leitmotifs of absence and loss accompany them in the novel".

Another victim of patriarchal society is Rahel's maternal grandmother Mammachi whose all potentials were destroyed by her husband's brutishness. She had pioneered pickle making into something commercially viable which is not supported by her husband who retired as a scientist without discovering anything. Mammachi is exceptionally talented in music. When her talent was revealed to her husband by her teacher, he released all the animal fury of jealousy in him on her. Within the family in conjugal relationship these tendencies assume another dimension. What is painful is the male attempt to break the spirit of women's sense of independence and progress. Without protesting against the chauvinism, she starts exercising her authority over her daughter and grandchildren with qualms.

A perfect example of Mammachi's perpetuating the cycle of not only self hate for her womanhood, but also projecting hate on other woman is her indifference to Chako's sexual escapades with low caste women. She understands her son's 'men's needs', in order to feel more at ease about the arrangement; she pays the women who satisfy Chako's "needs". This allows her to view the women as whores. The same mother condemns the love affair of Ammu with an untouchable. Susan Stanford Friedman's excellent essay, "Feminism, State Fiction and Violence: Gender, Geopolitics, and Transnationalism" explains the hypocrisy of Mammachi of her son and daughter. Mammachi implements the rules that govern her own restricted existence. She hinders Ammu and Rahel, yet praises Chako. She refuses to acknowledge that her hateful insecurities dictate her emotions and expressions towards her female relatives. She is hardly aware that she had already abandoned all her personal convictions and freedom, slipping into the mould of traditional family set-up.

The concept of women against each other reaches full scale in Roy's character Aunt Baby Kochamma. Her unfortunate past controls her miserable future Male Chauvinistic society molds

Baby's psyche to a cruel perfection. The embittered, jealous, and ignorant spinster is the worst enemy of all women fighting for civil rights or at least the womanly right to live as a woman without control or suppression. Baby Kochamma shrewdly dehumanizes Rahel and Ammu, secretly envies Mammachi, and feels inferior to free white women like Margaret Kochamma. Dr. Ambreen Hai, an Assistant Professor of English at Smith College, writes convincingly on the matter regarding Baby Kochamma's betrayal of other women. Baby Kochamma herself felt the fate of the wretched Man-less Woman. Unhappy Baby grudges Ammu and her children, her love affair, her divorce, essentially all the womanly things that Ammu should be entitled to that Baby never attempted to obtain due to her environment. The resentment festers in the barren woman. She is barren not because she has no children, but for discontentment and never experiencing true love. So she scales her niece's fate by destroying Ammu's lover and beginning Ammu's own rapid descent into self destruction and death. In this vicious circle everyone is involved. In traditional society such forces flourish and find encouragement in maintaining their hold over the weak.

CONCLUSION

It becomes evident that women's place in a male-chauvinistic society is never equal to that of men. Women's sufferings start with their family and continue throughout Mammachi, Ammu, Rahel and Baby Kochamma suffer differently due to the cruel treatment of the society they live in. social structures are so formed as to sanctify women's victimization. Arundhati Roy's depiction of the miserable lives of women in this novel critiques in unmistakable terms the perpetuation of these exploitative forces.

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