

Feminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Arundhati Roy is a significant booker prize winner in 1997 for her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. She is an Indian novelist who writes in English. In her novel, she has employed women characters whose position at home and in society can be analysed. Roy's *The God of Small Things* has been selected for a brief study in this paper.

The focus in Arundhati Roy's novel is on the irrationalities and injustice of domestic and social life of women. She attacks the double standard that one sex is to be sheltered, and judged and kept from power, while the other, regardless of its behaviour, runs the world. Arundhati's assaults, on the lopsided values of a male dominated society, are characterised by their humour, seasoned with irony and sarcasm which tend to avoid extremities of aggression and hostility. Most of the male characters in this family chronicle exhibit chauvinistic tendencies which vary in degrees. The novel contains stories of death, broken marriages, unreasonable hate, revenge, sexuality and violence. When an overall analysis of the novel is conducted, it is not only the story of a family that comes to the fore, but it is also the story of suffering in a wider perspective, which does not seem to have an end. As for *The God of Small Things*, "small things" refers to "small people" and other creatures which, in fact, deserve more attention than "big things", but these small things are ignored and paid less attention .

As the novel is indisputably about the twins -Esthappen and Rahel, who can be considered as the protagonists of the novel and the narrative view of the authoress, intrinsically this novel is an argument for and against the good and evil in society with special reference to women. *The God of Small Things* highlights the position of women folk in India. It presents before us the constant struggle of women against their incessant exploitation, torture and struggle which they undergo because of the male dominated conservative society. In the novel, women of three generations are discussed , who are raised and born in different circumstances . The first and oldest generation is Mammachi, then the generation of Ammu, and the youngest generation is Rahel. All experience difficult life due to domination of male in the society . They are mostly confronted with marital and family problems.

Mammachi, the grandmother has an unhappy marriage. She got married in puberty with Pappachi, who was seventeen-year older to her who has nearly controlled every step of hers. She is constantly beaten by her husband. In addition, Pappachi insulted Mammachi as she was never allowed to sit in his Plymouth, until after his death. She is not only a passive victim but is also the target of the jealousy of her entomologist husband. As Mammachi's music teacher Launsky Tieffenthal makes the mistake of informing her husband that Mammachi was "exceptionally talented" and "potentially concerned class", her music lessons stop abruptly. (Roy 67) Her playing the violin comes as a contrast to all the violence performed upon her and may be a suggestion that music is her attempt to be heard, to be given a voice.

It is seen that not only her husband but her own son also gave the same trauma in her life, "When her son Chacko, her privileged and Oxford educated son returned home after his divorce from Margaret, he takes over Mammachi's pickle factory and referring to the factory as "... my factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (57) without regarding Mammachi who had started and developed the factory. Chacko replaces her and reclaims the role of the patriarch as it belongs only to the men in the family. Mammachi is made a sleeping partner. Chacko becomes a businessman, the Marxist's owner of the pickle factory, a capitalist enterprise. Mammachi did nothing but accepted it passively. Whatever her husband did, being a virtuous woman, she had to accept it because it was imposed by the society.

Ammu, the woman in the second generation in the novel also faces the same agony. She is the most important female character in *The God of Small Things*, a middle class bourgeois woman. Because of her parents' traditional beliefs, she lives as the second. As a matter of fact, her parents give more affection to his brother for being a man than her as a woman. She is a divorcee with two children, Estha and Rahel. Moreover, being single parent of two children, her position in society is worse. She had no other choice but to live in her parents' house controlled by men. When another marriage took place, Ammu leaves Ayemenem and lives in Calcutta with her second husband. But, unfortunately, he is not well employed, he turns out to be an alcoholic and even urges her to sleep with his boss, Mr. Hollick, after which Ammu leaves him and returns with the twins, Estha and Rahel, to Ayemenem. But that makes her position worse in society. It is because the society believes that a good woman should live with her husband and accept her husband unconditionally. A divorced woman is

considered equal to an un-virtuous woman. While her brother is also divorced, but no one tells anything to him and he leads his life cheerfully. This demonstrates the dissimilar conditions for man and woman in the society.

She has been deserted, there was no one in her life to give her pleasure. In this barren life she found Velutha, an untouchable. This man gave support to her sinking boat. She fell in love with him, and thus, she violates the "Love laws" which her community has inherited from, among other things, their Hindu past. Her transgression of the caste, class and religious boundaries mounts a rebellion of a kind against her marginalisation as a woman. Aijaz Ahmad calls her "a woman of great grit" (Prasad 39) But for this act of fulfilling her impulse she is banished from her home and afterwards, dies exiled. But before her acceptance of such fate, in desperate attempts of self-realisation, she becomes a symbolic personification of all subalterns, especially women, who challenge power structures of the social order as is also pointed out by Murari Prasad:

At the heart of Roy's astounding book
is the conflict between the characters
excluded from institutional power and
their hegemonic counterparts (44)

Her situation could represent the typical problems of an Indian woman who is dependent on her husband's fate. Her relationship with Velutha is particularly significant in that their affair is considered to be both a sin, as it is extra-marital, and a crime, as it is between the members of two different classes in the caste system. In fact, the untouchables are not even regarded as a part of the caste system. In this respect, we can regard the untouchables as subaltern subjects as well, people whose voice is lost both in the social class system and also under the colonial rule. The narrator also refers in the novel to Velutha as 'the God of Small Things':

If he touched her, he couldn't talk to
her, if he loved her he couldn't leave,
if he spoke he couldn't listen, if he
fought he couldn't win. Who was he,
the one-armed man? Who could he
have been? The God of Loss? The
God of Small Things? The God of
Goose Bumps and Sudden Smiles?
Of Sourmetal Smells – like steel bus-
rails and the smell of the bus

conductor's hands from holding them? (Roy 217)

Even when Sophie Mol dies, Velutha is unfairly punished simply because he was there near the river, where he used to meet Ammu. In all these situations involving discrimination, Ammu as a woman is punished and totally silenced, as Velutha is. As Sunaina Singh also emphasises, "in India a woman's life is governed by tradition and family customs. A good woman is one who is a good daughter, wife and mother. To be good means to be of a sacrificing, self-abnegating, meek and quiet nature." (27)

From the character of Ammu, we can learn that Ammu is the woman who tries to rebel against the Hindu values and patriarchy system in Indian society. Unlike her mother, she cannot accept the bad attitude and actions of her husband and prefers divorce than keeping her marriage. Ammu is also the example of a member of society who breaks the communal mores of India.

One more important character of this novel is Rahel. She is Ammu's daughter and Estha's sister. She is the woman who has no place in either her family or society. She lives in her grandparent's house, but not like a normal child. She has witnessed injustices done to her mother. As Rahel is growing up unattended and unwanted, her presence is always ignored, so she never practices real Hindu tradition. In this way, Rahel becomes a free woman who unlike her mother, is not restricted by mental restrictions of the Hindu traditions. This is why, on her return to Ayemenem, she replies to an old man who asks about her marital status, "We are divorced" (130) without worrying what the old man will think about her answer.

Estha and Rahel are subjected to adversity because their parents got separated. They, along with their mother were unwanted in their grandmother's place. Despite this, they do acquire a good education. They have a battered childhood, because of their father's "drunken violence followed by post-drunk badgering", when they were barely two, "When his bouts of violence began to include the children, and the war with Pakistan began, Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed to her parents in Ayemenem." (42). The two children and especially Rahel, as a girl, had a double stigma of mixed parent age attached to them, both "religious (because their father was Hindu and mother Syrian Christian) and ethnic (their father being a Bengali and mother, a Keralite)." (91) Moreover, they were the children of divorced parents. Rahel was disliked

by Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria and even Chacko. Deprived of conventional parental love, Ammu is both father and mother to her. She also derives pleasure from the company and intimacy of her brother. Finally, she considers Velutha, to be a father figure on whose back she rides. Being disliked by her elderly relatives, she feels resentment against them. When her mother's liaison with Velutha is discovered, she is locked in the bedroom. Rahel, along with her twin brother, tries to find out the reason at the tender age of seven and their mother calls them, "millstones round my neck". (253)

The twins plan to escape in a boat, accompanied by their cousin, Sophie Mol, who accidentally drowns. The police arrest Velutha and Rahel has to go to the police station with her brother Estha to identify Velutha as a criminal. Ammu is forced to leave the room in which she had locked herself and has to leave Ayemenem House and dies shortly afterwards. Estha is sent back to his father and the twins face the trauma of separation. The novelist puts it thus, While other children of their age learned other things, Estha and Rahel learned how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws. (55) Rahel has a hard time in school and is expelled three times. Being, marginalised because of her religion/ community, gender, class and age, she fits the category of the subaltern and her acts of non-conformity can be considered as acts of resistance through which she wants to bring about some kind of change. The most important act by Rahel is that of consummating her incestuous love for her twin brother, Estha, which though an act of personal self-assertion, is also deeply political, challenging indigenous /local inequalities in post-colonial India.

Baby Kochamma is the daughter of Reverend John Ipe and sister of Pappachi who is another maltreated victim in the novel. She is in love with the Roman Catholic priest, Father Mulligan. To win over him Baby Kochamma converts to the Roman Catholic faith. However, she does not dare to challenge the traditional ideas of love and marriage prevalent in post-colonial India. Baby Kochamma does not run away to fulfil her dreams and upholds very reactionary ideas, and thus her dream of marrying father Mulligan gets shattered. She is a failure and starts living in isolation in the Ayemenem house. She felt that she had the fate of the wretched Man-less woman. Amitabh Roy opines, "It is a pity that she submits in the name of decency and honour to the very sexist, casteist and communal prejudices that have stood in her way and denied fulfilment to her."(Amitabh 62) She hates the Hindus, does not think that a married or

divorced daughter has any position in her parents' home and is vehemently against inter-community marriage. Thus like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma also apparently submits to the patriarchal social norms without any hesitation as pointed out by Antonio Navarro-Tejero in her article titled, "Power Relationships in *The God of Small Things*":

The first generation of women in the
novel give extreme importance to
patriarchal social norms, indeed they
succumb to them... (Prasad 105)

But if closely examined she puts up a line of implicit resistance against the biased socio-political and economic order in the post-colonial India.

So, Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel, four women in *The God of Small Things*, interrogate pre-colonial/indigenous norms, customs, laws, values and structures connected with patriarchy, class, caste and feudal-capitalist economic structures.

To sum up, Roy exploits common everyday Indian issues in her novel. Her story involves sorrow, grief, problematic marital relationships, non-marital affairs, and violent punishments for breaking social rules (involving incest, the caste system and so forth). We also see personal challenges, courage to stand against the taboos, women seeking their identity as human beings, as individuals, but the dominant masculine voice is so oppressive that these women are silenced in various ways. This novel was a revolutionary attempt on the part of Arundhati who tried to open the eyes of Indian community towards the callousness of treating women as objects. Women thus treated are considered soulless beings, sub-human and playthings for men. This imbalance in society explains much of the unhappiness prevailing in our families and the battered lives of children who are exposed to this very partial and unjust view of life. The end result is a paralysed society unable and unwilling to grow.

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