



THEMATICS

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V.M. Rasure
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Principal Advisor

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**A STUDY OF FEMININE
CONSCIOUSNESS IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S
*THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

Abdul Anees Abdul Rasheed

The canvas of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* candidly exhibits the various contemporary issues, such as discrimination based on gender and caste; the environment protection, marginalization and so on. But the efforts are taken to explore the different social factors and the conventional collective mindset in the novel that cause the sufferings of women in the male dominated society. In this sense, this novel may also be taken as a literary device exploring the psychological exploitation and emotional tortures suffered by women. The setting of novel is a well established patriarchal society, where women are naturally oppressed and silenced. The novel deals with the unfulfilled longings and shattered faiths of women. Social prejudice, the gender biased attitudes and the social norms and conditions falsely generated by the patriarchal society have compelled the women to mutely bear their subaltern or marginalized existence.

Many renowned Indian Women Novelists such as Nayantra Sahgal, Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, Mahsweta Devi, Manju

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Kapur, Chitra Banerjee, etc. have dealt with the feminist issues: atrocities against women, pitiable lives of women in the contemporary society. This paper is an attempt to have an analytical study of the subaltern character of 'Ammu' the protagonist of the novel; it deals with the sufferings tolerated by Ammu; and also explores how Ammu's tragic end is the only escape for her from the evils of the suffocating patriarchal society.

In spite of the significant changes in women's position in society in the post-independence era, she is still not totally emancipated. These contradictions can be understood by means of the critical analysis of the Indian social structure which comprises institutions like caste system, joint family, religious values and practices consolidating women's dominated and subordinate position. Maitreyi Mukhopadhyay critically opines,

It should be emphasized that the poor status of women. Their oppression and exploitation cannot be examined as an isolated problem in Indian society. Although the status of women constitutes a problem in most societies in the rigidly hierarchical and inequitable social structure which exist in India the relative inferiority and superiority of various roles is much more clearly defined. The inequalities and subordination of women is an instrument or function of the social structure.¹

Feminists, by means of their creative writings highlights on the ways in which the cultural representation like literature undermines and reinforce the economics, social, political and psychological suppression and oppression of women in social scenario.

In post colonial studies, the term 'subaltern' underlines one's subordinate position in term of class, gender, caste, race and culture. Gaytri Spivak uses this term to address the dominated and marginalized groups. In her essay, '*Can the Subaltern Speak* (1985),' she writes:

The subaltern cannot speak there is no virtue in global boundary list with women as a pious item representation has not withered always. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with flourish.²

In this novel, Ammu is presented as a subaltern character. The woman has been always been as a lifeless toy in the hands of man. The man needs her love, hence, he adores her, writes about her. But ironically, man does so because he is just a self-centred. Feminist writings then vomit the suppressed and oppressed feelings and emotions of the subaltern. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Right* (1792), Oliver Sohreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911) Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. (1999) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), are the classic books making the diagnosis of the problem of women's inequality in society.

Oppressed minority groups whose present has crucial to the self definition of the majority group's subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power.³

The present paper attempts to focus on the marginalization of women and how their voices are silenced. The women are directly or indirectly hated by both their families and society. *The God of Small Things* unfurls a plethora in terms of the change in political scene in Kerala; the problems besetting women in the male dominated society. The novel remarkably deals with the falsely generated social norms and conditions of the patriarchal society causing prejudice, injustice and mainly the oppression mutely faced by the women. The woman is victimized everywhere: as a daughter in parents house; as a wife in her husband's house; as a worker in a factory; as an employee in an office and so on. The major issues covered by this novel are the struggle of a woman for the establishment of identity and yearning for the economic and sexual freedom.

The God of Small Things represents the constant agitation of the women against their incessant exploitation and torture in the male dominated conservative social framework. The social set up is such a way as if it has little or nothing to offer to the unfortunate and shattered women like Ammu.

Her eighteenth birthday came and went unnoticed or at least unmarked upon by her parents Ammu grew desperate. All days she dreamed of escaping from Ayemenem and the clutches of

her ill-tempered father and long suffering mother. (GST, P.42)

On one hand she is deprived of college education, and on the other hand her marriage becomes a difficult problem as dowry could not be afforded. It results in that she has to wait at home and becomes domesticated. Virginia Woolf sees domestic life as almost exclusively social without any privacy for women.

The son of the house may be granted freedom to develop his mind, he may have a room of his own, but the daughter is expected to be at every one's back and call for domestic life cultivate the irrational side of a woman's nature; it is distinguished by the primacy of intellect. The domestic arts involve mainly the fine discrimination of feeling and the ability to about adjustment in personal relation." 4

For Ammu, a moment of psychological comfort comes when Pappachi lets her go to Calcutta to pay a visit to a distant aunt's wedding. There she meets her future husband, a sober looking black Hindu Bengali from the tea estates in Assam and without looking back steps in to matrimony. Moreover for her, it is the only a kind of refuge. But soon Ammu realises her gross blunder to marry him. Because she becomes a victim of alcoholic and even she is forced to smoke. Later on she gives birth to twins Estha and Rahel. Her husband's boss Mr. Hollic advised him to go away for a while for treatment and sends his wife to his premises to be 'looked after'. He says,

You are very lucky man; you have wonderful family, beautiful children, and such an attractive wife. (GST)

Ammu reluctantly returns to her parents' home with her children. There too she is astonished to find her parents to be cold and indifferent towards her. She cries to see the miserable condition of her children. According to Baby Kochamma, Ammu's ant-

'She had no position at all.' (GST)

As she has been divorced; and with such a disqualification, she has no choice but to suffer the fate of a wretched man-less woman. Ammu's fault lies in her being too mild and docile to assert herself.

Colette Dowling explains:

It has to do with dependency : the need to lean on someone those need say with us into adulthood clamouring for fulfilment right alongside our need to be self sufficient any women who looks within knows that she was never trained to feel comfortable with the idea of taking care of herself, standing up for herself asserting herself. ⁵

We must admit that still woman has been subject to all kind of atrocities, biases and partial behaviour. She has been viewed as a sex object; and is believed to be a part of the weaker gender. This belief has been nursed by majority of people. People do not tolerate gender equality. In the eyes of men 'woman' is a mere toy; a something that is thrown in the dust-bin. Gaytri Spivak says

Between patriarchy and imperialism subject constitution and object formation the figure of the women disappears not in to a pristine nothingness, but a violent shutting which the displaced figuration of the third world women caught between tradition and modernism.⁶

Roy implicitly emphasises for greater social reform in the rigid positioning of women and the intolerable plight of the deprived class. Ammu has to bear the hardships right from her very young age. Her brother, Chocko and she are the representatives of men and women with different destinies. Her brother, being a male member of the family could get the higher education at Balliol College Oxford. On the contrary Ammu is deprived of education. Chacko is privileged to enjoy all rights, concessions and status in society. The label divorce does not affect his position, besides he is not even held responsible for the upbringing of his daughter Sophie mol. In Ayemenem he, being a male holds the reins of control while Ammu is at his mercy for her and her children's subsistence. She works in the pickles factory, but Chacko claims 'what is yours is mine, and what is mine is also mine' He also tells Rahel and Estha,

'Ammu had no locust's stand.'(GST, P.57)

From a feminist perspective the novel is about the violence inflicted on women and the paternal tyranny enveloping the unfortunate children. It candidly exposes the double standards of

morality in society regarding men and women. Virginia Woolf too frequently compared women to persecuted minorities. She implied that women as a 'class' are comparable to the humblest domestic servants finally, ironically, Virginia Woolf suggest that-

'Women may be likened the lowliest the most familiar subject of all.'⁷

Ammu's agitation against her fate does not bring her anything concrete. She has too many problems and personal misery which obstruct her on the way of the upbringing of her children. Though her fortune plays the mischievous tricks with her, she emerges as an ideal affectionate mother and an embodiment of love, care, discipline, and concern.

To Ammu her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other's company lolloping arm in traffic. Entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs. Ammu watched over them fiercely. Her watchfulness stretched her, made her taut and tense. (GST, P.336)

Ammu seeks her love outside the family, but her love is termed illicit, untraditional and sinful whereas Chacko's illicit relation with so many women is the outcome of his carnal lust. Ammu's loves Velutha, an untouchable; her children also admire him. Velutha has noticed Ammu as a women and felt that he has something to share with her and in return she has some gifts to give him. Ammu is lured by Velutha's meaningful gaze. Unable to control herself, she crosses all the social and moral constraints and barriers and walks across to the life infusing company of the paravan. She allows herself to be drenched in the love of Velutha every night for two weeks, without caring consequences. It results in that Ammu is locked up in a room and is beaten up mercilessly. On the contrary Chacko's loveless lust goes on unabated, unhindered and unobjected as if it is as casual as having conjugal relation with wife. Ammu has been destined to tolerate the havoc in house and society: beating, shutting up, caged inside house, police interference, false FIR police beating, gherao, strike, warning to leave house, and the worst to all separation of twins from each other. This time Ammu and Velutha are in a parallel plane.

All this focuses on the prejudice and the dualistic approach of society towards men & women. This society considers man's need to be granted; it is presumed to be the natural thirst which is to be quenched at any cost. But ironically, the women has always been taken to be 'The Second Sex'. Virginia Woolf. Observes:

Imaginatively she is completely significant she pervades poetry from cover to cover, she all but absent from history. Her representation in history, in other words' has always defined 'negation.'⁸

Ammu is subject to all abuses, torment, torture, pain. She has lost sympathy. As a result she is left supportless. Ammu leaves the Ayemenem house and at the time of death, she was alone in a grimy dingy room of Bharat Lodge in Allepey.

Ammu candidly represents a subaltern character: abused and exploited by the outside world; the police and the politics and even by her own parents, brother and aunt. Her downfall is brought upon by the male character. Roy has deliberately created the character of Ammu to show that the woman is the integral part in man's life without which man's life can not be worth living. Her marginalisation; her discard and humiliations, on one hand, cause her own downfall and on the other hand it becomes the social stigma. This is the time to consider sympathetically the woman as an individual as a renowned Urdu poet, Kaifi Azmi says in his poem entitled *Aurat* (the Woman):

Tu haqeeqat bhi hai, dil-chasp kahai hi nahi

Teri Hasti bhi hai ek Cheez, jawaani hi nahi

Oh! Woman, you are too a concrete being and not only an interesting story,

Your individuality is too worth living and not only your youth.

This paper attempts to trace how Arundhati Roy in her *The God of Small Things* has dealt with the apathy of women in Indian patriarchal society; how women are socially, economically and politically deprived by the society; how the woman is the most neglected, tortured, humiliated, deprived, marginalized, subaltern, and subordinated. It is shown by means of the character of Ammu. On one hand, the character of Ammu presents the marginalization

of the woman; on the other hand, it opens a discourse. On the surface level, the condition of women is seen rapidly improving, but when the surface is scratched, we are astonished to witness the emotional and psychological havoc that the women have to go through. At the mental level, the andocentric approach has not yet been changed; the social, cultural and religious norms constantly perpetuate the marginalization of women.

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