

## Study of Gender gap in Roy's the God of Small Things

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### Abstract

Arundhati Roy, primarily a social realist, wants to get rid of the gender disparity prevalent in her society. Roy holds a view that even a woman can do an equal Part in shaping and developing a family and society. She revolts against man-made antihuman establishments and societal issues causing discrimination against the so called weaker sex. She evinces keen interest in the eradication of these social evils and her novel is nothing but an artistic cause to arouse the slumbering conscience of the people to remove this male centred attitude in all the endovers of life. To dramatise this idea the novelists takes up a middle class family in Kerala, The family of Kochamma. The Kochamma family has a history of poor relations between its male and female members. Ammu's mother, Mammachi, for example, is severely beaten and abused by her husband, and she becomes the victim of his anger and frustration whenever he faces a failure in the outside world. He leaves a little room for Ammu to grow as an independent and confident individual. Her only objective in life is to find a "reasonable husband", depending upon him for the rest of her life. Her attitude also corresponds to the idea of a "good daughter" shared both by Hindus and Muslims. Chaco, the elder brother saves Mammachi, from his father's abusive attitude. All these incidents make this paper relevant to be studied as a novel of patricentric.

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Gender disparity holds the central place in Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*, taking one of the South Indian states viz, Kerala. Roy presents both the miserable plight and also the struggle of women trying to have some fulfilment in a male centered society. In *The God of Small Things* Roy portrays the conflict between male and female to make male prevail over the females to sustain their supremacy. The novel graphically shows how women are helpless in the hands of men to resolve their frictions among themselves by taking advantage of their weakness men take the corrective position to establish their manliness.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* evinces the hard core exploitation of women. Since the arrival of women novelists to the fore front, it has become a common factor of feminism not only India but also in the whole realm of literature. Novelist like Roy always likes to express the fate of women in India. These feminine writings and feminine identity help women to achieve little liberation from patriarchy. Roles ordained by patriarchy reduce women to a subaltern status. Women's quest is to cast aside patriarchal roles and gain freedom from the shackles of patriarchy. A novel must have a social purpose and it must be placed before the readers with sense of enkindling some societal emotions among the readers. Art for art's sake does not hold well at this juncture. Whatever is said or written for art's sake alone, mostly loses its social relevance and gradually its readers. So this paper is an attempt with the intention of bringing out some of the social discrepancy aggravated towards women in Roy's *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*.

The history of Indian Literature is the mental activity that has been on for a very long time. Hence it encompasses a very long legacy. India and Indian thoughts have influenced the mind of the world to some extent. India has been the forerunner of many of the global thinking. In the beginning religious writings formed the fore front of Indian Literature, Starting from our great epics, Vedas, Buddhist and many other religious sects have contributed plenty to the Indian literary works and thus to the well beings of man. The contributions of prominent writers for the enrichment of Indian English and the life and works of novelists are perceptively discussed.

It has attained a rich growth, mounting extraordinary heights in the context of the contemporary Indian literature scene. The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of many writers whose literary

manifesto was to write for social, political, and economic purpose. The purpose was not only to throw light upon the social evils and malpractices prevailing in the society in those days but also to employ fiction to the cause of social amelioration. The proliferation of novel in Indian English manifests itself multifariously encompassing almost every aspect of Indian social life.

Of late there came a tradition of story – telling, a brilliant galaxy of story – tellers who illumine the pages of Indian history and literature. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's wife* (1864), which is typical of a transitional period in the history of Indian literature was the first attempt made by an Indian to produce a novel in English. Later there emerged many others and among them the outstanding living woman novelist and a social critic is Arundhati Roy, and also several others have made their contribution for the flourishing of Indian English fiction. The Indian literature has achieved far reaching importance both in India and abroad in the recent decades. The Indian fiction in English is now living, developing, and evolving literary force. It is also plays a significant part of third world or new literatures. The raise of the novel in India is not purely a literary phenomenon. It is a social phenomenon, rather than a mere fulfillment of a social need or desire. It has strong association with social, political, and economic conditions of the country. It is an accepted fact, in all these associations men occupy the position of masters while women ought to lose whatever little individuality is allowed in a patriarchal situation. Women are mostly forced to dance to the raw tunes of the men.

Literatures in general and novel in particular seem to amalgamate in itself two

Main ingredients - the individuality of the novelist (semi autobiography of Roy) and literary milieu (Booker Award in Roy's case). One of the main duties of a great writer is to represent the society and its various influence in art. In other words, literature and society are the two facets of the same coin; they are interwoven both internally and externally. They form an integral part of the significant trend of blending realities and literature (Art) in the Indian novels. Her ideology is imbued with an acute social awareness and a distinctive sense of responsibility towards life. She desires a radical transformation of the Indian society and depicts the multiple tensions existing at various levels. The novel encompasses the wide spectrum of class, caste and gender discrepancies.

Literature has thousands of threads which can make the beautiful piece of art and life. *The God of Small Things* is a fiction roughly bounded up threads. But each thread has its own importance in the creative work. Hence the prime duty of the scholar lies in "Unknotting" the whole bundle without breaching them. As Roy has attempted to untangle a section of a society, this paper also tries to untangle the same idea from the fiction showing special interest in woman and caste.

In any nation's history the second sex is always treated as second only. Women's marginalization is an old story. Women have been regarded as subservient to men since time immemorial. Even great thinkers and philosophers have regarded women as inferior to men. Aristotle, the great philosopher believed that femininity is an incomplete version of masculinity. Since women writers dealt with themes of marginalization and domestic incarceration, their works were reckoned perfunctory and below the rank of literary merit. Arundhati Roy draws special attention to the fact that a family which swears by male supremacy and which entrenches its familial code in the past is bound to come woe sooner or later.

Ammu, the central character of the novel, has only a marginal existence in the family structure. A traditional patriarchal society places little importance on women's education. Ammu's father Pappachi, does not like the idea of spending money on his daughter, and she is never encouraged to find her place in life. Marriage is the only justification of her survival. Ammu finished her schooling the same year that her father retired from the job in Delhi and moved to Ayemenem. Pappachi insisted that a college education was unnecessary expense for a girl so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with him. "There was little for a young girl to do in Ayemenem other than to wait for marriage proposals..." (38). She recounts apathetically "Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society," Ammu said. Chacko said, "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine." (56). No woman in her novel stands out to be rebellious. They are all cheaply subjugated to someone whether young or old. They have been portrayed as loyal servants to men. The phrase "the Heart of Darkness" is often being repeated in various context referring to different characters but the point is that throughout the novel a genuine reader automatically gets reminded that something is missing or gone astray in all the characters and they in turn try to find the thing in the novel, especially among women.

Roy presents three generations of men and women. Mammachi is the representative of that generation of women who have always been silent sufferers of male atrocities. Baby Kochamma and Father Mulligan are the representatives of the generation born in pre-independence India; her love with Father Mulligan but cannot flout patriarchal norms blatantly and becomes a victim of patriarchy as she is destined to lead a life of spinsterhood fulfilling the patriarchal role of a pure, sexless woman. Margaret Kochamma and Ammu represent that generation of women who defy the patriarchy overtly but suffer for the offence in the form of failed marriages. Rahel is the representative of liberated women who do not capitulate to any social and religious norms and boundaries. Rahel is presented as a liberated woman, free from the shackles of patriarchy. Through

the character of Rahel, Roy presents the woman who overtly challenges the patriarchy and patriarchal niche for woman. Rahel's unsavory past haunts her and she loses the zest for life. She grows up unnoticed, unsupervised "without anybody to arrange a marriage for her. Without anybody who would pay her a dowry" (18). She remains in constant search for identity amidst the chauvinists.

Right from the beginning of the novel, patriarchy is responsible for all the twist and turns taking place in the novel. Ammu's rebellion because of patriarchy and its consequences decides her plight. She was brought up under the supervision of her father Pappachi, "a monstrous suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning" (p.180). Since her childhood she has been witnessing the brutal, inhuman face of the patriarchy. She is subjected to regular beatings by her father. The sacred façade of marriage either lacks harmony or comes crumbling down in such an imbalanced familial set-up. Ammu didn't pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that *anything*, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem. She wrote to her parents informing them of her decision. They didn't reply. (39) Ammu's dreams of a better future are crushed down as her husband turns out to be a drunkard. Escaping from Pappachi's brutality, now Ammu is subjected to the beatings of her drunken husband. Ammu tolerantly suffers drunken violence of her husband as her destiny. Ammu returns to Ayemenem house with "two young children. And no more dreams"(42).

The "local disapproval" stands for the societal attitude towards a divorcee (woman). For Ammu's marriage proves to be the gallows, an enclosure and an absurd institution in which she becomes the victim of her husband's atrocities. Contrary to Ammu's plight her husband remarries and leads a life of conjugal bliss, free from the responsibilities of the twins.

After returning to Ayemenem, Ammu's misery reaches its zenith when she is drawn into sexual relations with Velutha, the untouchable. Velutha is murdered by the police for his offence of mating with a 'touchable' woman and Ammu is ousted from the house. Her little family disintegrates as Estha is sent to his Baba and Rahel remains with the Ayemenem family. "Perhaps Ammu, Estha and she [Rahel] were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory."(31) Roy repeatedly reminds this point to highlight the male preeminence over women. All that happens in the novel is to degrade women. They are at the receiving end while males escape safely.

Women are victimized by utilizing their economic status. Chacko was a self-proclaimed Marxist. He would call pretty women who worked in the factory to his room, and on the pretext of lecturing them on labor rights and trade union law, flirt with them outrageously. ... Ammu said it was all hogwash. "Just a case of a spoiled princeling playing *Comrade! Comrade!* An Oxford avatar of the old Zamindar mentality—a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood" (63). Finding no other way, at one point Ammu compelled herself to make her own choice but fortunately or unfortunately that too deceived her wish. "She had had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man" (38). This is a pitiable plight of an Indian woman. They have been exposed as an object of some other subject who, all the time monitor and block even their dream of being their own.

Comrade Pillai's curious enquiries about Rahel's husband and those issues demonstrate the patriarchal patterns that are deeply embedded in society. His shocked utterance of 'Die-vorced?' symbolizes his patriarchal outlook. Divorce in patriarchal society is symbolic of death for women. "'We're divorced'. Rahel hoped to shock him into silence. 'Die-vorced?' His voice rose to such a high register that it cracked on the question mark. He even pronounced the word as though it were a form of death. (124)" The most unfortunate lot of all in the novel. Life, for Estha and Rahel is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. They are thrown into a meaningless universe. Constant neglect and isolation on familial and social level leads Ammu to become "restless and untamed" (43). Her biological needs compel her to search for a man to share her hidden grief. She throws away the morality imposed by the patriarchal social structure to the wind.

Ammu's death is more than fate playing a nasty joke on her. It is the direct result of her having crossed the limits imposed by her community. Her act is the negation of generations of her family's conforming to the rules imposed to live in an organized group. Ammu's dead body is also compared to a dead cockroach. Ammu's death remains as unnoticed as that of lowly insect. Chacko wraps Ammu's body in a dirty bed sheet and transports it to the electric crematorium as the church refuses to bury her.

Baby Kochamma adheres to the patriarchal rules and the patriarchal niche for the women and demands the same respect and submission to the sacrosanct rules of the patriarchy that she has shown in her prime. Since she is a victim of patriarchal traditions, she wants a fellow sufferer in the form of Ammu. Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had

graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-fewer women. The sad, Father Mulligan-less Baby Kochamma. (P.44-45)

Mammachi is beaten by Pappachi either with a brass flower vase or an ivory handle crop every night: Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place. One night Pappachi broke the bow of Mammachi's violin and threw it in the river. (pp.47-48) notwithstanding the brutality meted out to Mammachi, she is more than a passive sufferer. She in turn, participates in the oppression of Ammu.

Baby Kochamma tames the next generation "All you have to do is to say 'Yes.' (302) ... As children. As teenagers. As adults. Had they been deceived into doing what they did? Had they been tricked into condemnation? In a way, yes. But it wasn't as simple as that. They both knew that they had been given a choice. And how quick they had been in the choosing! They hadn't given it more than a second of thought before they looked up and said (not together, but almost) "Save Ammu." Save us. Save our mother.

The whole novel represents the women characters as something looked down upon. Roy herself does not show a woman to be an authoritative one. Each female character is portrayed so as to have some deformities and thus she is not looked upon by others. Females are shown as objects of pleasing and pleasure giving to men. The allegation of male dominance found expression in the code of moral conduct incurred upon women whereas men's wantonness was considered as an expression of masculinity. With the passage of time, women's marginalization took various forms such as *commodification* of women for sexual, reproductive and entertainment purposes. This gender bias was not limited to theoretical level, rather in every realm of society women were treated as subaltern to men. Women's place in family, the basic institution of society, was secondary and marginalized. Traditional family institutions set a niche for men as head of the family whereas women were destined to play secondary roles of house-keeping and child rearing.

Ammu's comment that "she had a choice was a great privilege (152)" is sarcastic; a woman in a patriarchal society can have a choice only in her imagination. Ammu's life is like a long incorrect sentence written by fate, cannot be punctuated by her. The narrator comments: "Little Ammu. Who never completed her corrections? (151)" Arundhati Roy's life exemplifies her maverick as well as struggling attitude as she willfully left home on her own and sold empty beer bottles to pay for her studies.

Ammu's plight out of her inferior status invokes her to protest against the prejudices, codes and rules that are hostile to women. Ammu's behaviour is rebellious in order to undermine the authority of the dominant ideology. Moreover they have witnessed the severe punishment meted out to Ammu and other women were "disproportionate" to their faults.

The author depicts current social turmoil and problems, as well as a clash between the fractional modernization of Indian masses and its traditional mentalities. The novel is remarkable not only for highlighting the perpetuation of untouchability and women's marginalization but also for "Anti-colonial resistance". Arundhati Roy dismantles the British cultural hegemony, an age old colonial device for intellectual colonization.

The patriarchal structure with its class and gender hierarchy is almost a universal phenomenon, cutting across all nations, religions and races. It is well known that sex differences do not necessarily imply sexual inequality and male dominance. However in a patriarchal social set-up masculinity signals an advantageous position whereas femininity is obviously linked with subservience and inferiority. Masculinity implies strength, virility, self-assertion, dominance, decision-making, and ownership rights. But femininity assumes weakness, passivity, docility, obedience and self-negation.

The novelist goes against the accepted traditions of the image of women as created by male centered society, Roy through her protagonist tries to create a new self-image for women, who despite the various trials and tribulations ultimately evolve into women capable of making and taking their own decisions. The inner experiences of women have been woven into the fabric of their writings thereby rendering the hitherto invisible as visible, and the trivial as important. All these embarrassing circumstances forced her to impale the male dominant society through her writings. Roy at the end embraces a very strong style to embarrass the gender disparaged society.

Roy in her writings seek to free love from these age-old shackles and instead, try to bring the female power into play as one seeking the liberation of women from the restrictive boundaries of traditional societal limitations as prescribed by patriarchy. The women in Roy often find themselves trapped in a conspiracy of male domination in the private domain of the home. The men who are expected to protect their interests fail to

do so. They gang up together, well supported by the discriminative order while the women to whom, they look for support insist on upholding the male hierarchy on which they depend for survival, promotion and social recognition.

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