

Self-alienation to Self-identification in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores the voice of female alienation and investigates the structure of despair that comes out of a female discourse based on the hapless life of a woman, Ammu. Ammu belongs to the patriarchal society. In patriarchal system, man is the controller of sexuality, economic and physical power. The woman in such set up suffers heavily due to the sexist bias. Arundhati Roy represents Indian mindset in the portrayal of Ammu's life. Ammu's character points out the social predicament of women in Indian society that provides little scope for choice for a woman who longs for existence. This paper traces a definite and marked growth of awareness among the female protagonists.

Key Words: Patriarchal, marginalization, feminine, womanhood, alienation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* presents a conflict between the traditional notion of Indian womanhood- wholly subservient to man and on the other side, the awakened woman's individual aspirations and her desire to be recognized as a human being in her own right. The intention of this paper is to show the protagonists' journey from self-alienation to self-identification. It also endeavours to show how woman protagonist grows in strength in spite of the obstacles imposed on her by the patriarchal society. The bulk of post-colonial New English literature has been generally preoccupied for the last few decades with the marginalization of women. Marginalization of women is a global phenomenon. The degree of marginalization differs from place to place and society to society.

2. Review of Literature:

In regard to the miserable condition of woman, Simone de Beauvoir says that men have constructed the status of women in the society though they are born as free human beings. The society gives subordinate position to the women and always considers women as the second-rate citizens. Regarding miserable plight of women, Simone de Beauvoir observes that though women are free like other creatures but they have been compelled by patriarchy to assume the status of other. This paper aims at exploring the voice of the female alienation in the selected texts and examines the structure of despair that emerges out of a feminine discourse on the sad tales of hapless women protagonists. We may recall in this connection the remarks of Luce Irigaray:

The relationship of women to their mothers and to other women- thus towards themselves - are rare subject to total narcissistic "black out", these relationships are completely devalued.....
Psychoanalysis has totally mythologized and "censored" the positive value of these relationships.
(Irigaray)

Women suffer due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society, which gives an inferior position to women and always treat them as subordinate. Gerda Learner is of the opinion that patriarchy is a tool for male to dominate over women in the society in general term. This chapter traces a definite and marked growth of awareness among the female protagonists. Each of the five novels presents a conflict between the traditional notion of Indian womanhood- wholly subservient to man and on the other side, the awakened woman's individual aspirations and her desire to be recognized as a human being in her own right. For centuries women have been subjected to various evils but now with the rising self-consciousness these evils have been brought to limelight and there seems to be a strong will power to break the manacles of the stale traditions. Emerging feminists have exposed the hollowness of the male writer's dominance and cruelties done against women. Misfortune women show their expressions in many ways whatever they perceive. Edward Said suggests that the canons of the center should be read with the work coming from the margin.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This paper is framed with the help of Postcolonial feminist theory using comparative and analytical methods. The paper is a literary work using primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources are based on library resources like reference books, scholarly journal. The subject matter is analyzed in the perspective of feminist

theories. The study has been interpretative, descriptive and exploratory using various feminist theories put forward by feminist critics.

4. DISCUSSION:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores the voice of female alienation and investigates the structure of despair that comes out of a female discourse based on the hapless life of a woman, Ammu. Ammu belongs to the patriarchal society. Ammu's character points out the social predicament of women in Indian society that provides little scope for choice for a woman who longs for existence. She becomes the victim of patriarchal subjugation when she is not permitted to continue her studies. Her father Pappachi regards female education as "unnecessary expense" (38) and so her effort to obtain higher education comes to an end abruptly. Finding no other alternative, she comes to Ayemenem house with her father from Delhi and has to wait for marriage. It makes clear the society's attitude that a girl is supposed to get education only if she is not getting married. In fact marriage is the *Summum bonum* of a woman's life as stated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Indian tradition treats a woman 'paraya dhan' other's property whose custodians are parents till she is handed over to her husband. Husband has the privilege to use her as his personal property. Women are brought up according to strict social code. They are reminded about their femininity the moment they attain adolescence. The sexist bias continues to operate right from their parents' house. She is prevented from developing her individuality. They are always reminded that they are destined for marriage at the ripe time. Lynne Sehgal points out that "a woman in a male-dominated society is thus conditioned into the emotional and cognitive traits of subordination and dependence" (Sehgal).

When no suitable marriage proposal comes in appropriate time, Ammu grows desperate. At Ayemenem, she feels like a captive lady fettered to household chores and dull, mechanical routine. Her frustration for sudden disruption of education, uncongenial atmosphere at house and lack of a viable alternative through marriage make her dejected: "She hatched several wretched little plans" (38-39). Eventually one of Ammu's plan works. As a result of her insistence, her father allows her to go to a distant relative living at Calcutta. As a matter of fact, she meets a young man at Calcutta who proposes to her five days after they first met. Ammu accepts the proposal of a man whom she knows so little and for such a short time, not because she has really fallen in loves with him but simply because of her frustration she takes the wrong decision. Few days later, due to her utter dismay she finds that she falls from the frying pan into fire. Ammu discovers that her husband is a complete alcoholic with deviousness nature. Her disappointment becomes unbearable when her husband, suspended from his job for alcoholism, agrees to his English Boss, Mr Hollick, demand of sending his "beautiful young and cheeky" (40), and "an extremely attractive wife...." (42) to his bungalow for being "looked after" (42). Ammu's refusal only aggravates her physical and mental torture. We may recall the observation made by a leading sociologist who says that "even the poorest Indian male is fortunate in having opportunities for releasing his impulse to domination and the fury of his frustrated ego, because he always has a wife whom he can treat as an inferior" (Mill). The author's implicit suggestion here is that Indian women can withstand suffering, even torture, but refuse to succumb to immorality against their wives. But when her husband begins violence against the children she does not have any other option but to snap the tie with her husband and return back to the very same place with her children from where she once had tried to run away. Her coming back to Ayemenem is not appreciated by her family.

Ammu is now burdened with the liability of two children, who are not really loved by anybody, and all her dreams have shattered. Although she loves them, and it is as much for them as for her sense of self-respect that she has deserted her husband, they are, nevertheless, like millstones' round her neck. Besides, at the familial level, she does not receive any sympathy at all. Her father would not believe that "an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another man's wife" (42), and to her mother her children are a nuisance. And so far as the society is concerned, her situation is a juicy topic. The relatives- near and distant- come to see her and actually chuckle at her discomfiture while they religiously express their lisp sympathy, so that "Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy" (43). While the traditional-minded women accept their false conditioning into subordination and dependence without demur, the sensitive and conscious women feel the necessity for identity, freedom and rebel against the traditional customs by rejecting a marriage that had become an emotional waste land for them. Certainly, then divorce gives freedom to women to get rid of an existence of suffering due to male aggression or gender oppression. Divorce, as Marilyn French says "like marriage, is morally neutral, it is good, in so far as it ends a long-term intimacy, it is to be lamented" (French). Thus, when the needs, wishes or individuality of one of the partners is ignored then this results in separation. At the very early stage, Ammu's life comes to a standstill, nothing to hope for, nothing to happen, only to spend the long uneventful days languish one after another, and her rebellious spirit only makes her more and more miserable as the days go by. At this moment when she knows that she is "already damned" (44), she becomes a lethal weapon capable of unleashing considerable damage. She realizes that though she lives in her parental house, she has no "Locusts Stand I" (159). Thus at twenty-four, Ammu has the painful realization that "life had been lived" (38) since she has spoilt her "only one chance" (38) by selecting the wrong man. She becomes virtually "untouchable" in her own home and family.

The concept of marriage as a sacrament and an indissoluble union is prevailing from centuries, and divorce is considered only a male's privilege. Woman is seen only in relation to man. She has no life of her own. A woman's whole existence is seen in relation to the service she can render to her husband. A more pitiable and resentful phase of woman's marginalization thus begins after her marriage. She is never recognized as an individual, an equal, and a human being with her own needs and desires. She is usually seen as an object providing sexual pleasure to man, an asset, a decoration piece, and a nursemaid to bring up the children and to shoulder all the responsibilities of the household. The nature of Indian woman is such that she readily accepts life with all its vagaries. In male dominated society, she is supposed to be an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent homemaker with multifarious roles to play in the family. In the words of Mary Ann Fergusson "... in every age, woman has been primarily as mother, wife, mistress and as sex object in their roles in relationship to man" (Fergusson). As a woman grows, she is inculcated with the idea of self-abnegation, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical modes of Sita, Savitri and Gandhari. Following these models, she is taught to be shy, gentle and dignified as a person, pure and faithful as wife and selfless, loving and thoughtful as a mother.

Marriage is the one interpersonal relationship that society sanctions unreservedly, but all marriages in *The God of Small Things* are failures. In condoning marriage, the community asserts its power; the marital relationship is acceptable because its parameters are laid down by external social forces; it is thus what Pratt calls an "archetypal enclosure" (45) within patriarchy, which kills all attempts at authenticity.

In marriage, each attribute of authenticity meets with its opposite: freedom to come and go is abrogated; early, ideal lovers are vanished, to be replaced by a husband who resembles the gothic villain; erotic freedom is severely limited; intelligence becomes a curse, and correspondingly, too much consciousness of one's situation leads to punishment or madness. (Pratt)

It is certainly so in the marriages of Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel. Constantly at the mercy of ill-tempered, jealous and violent husband, Mammachi accepts his beatings and his rages with humility and cries when he dies. Ammu who hated and feared her father, puts this down to sheer force of habit. As Shulamith Firestone explains:

In a patriarchal society men consider women their inferiors and project their own sense of inferiority. They identify themselves not with other women, but with men. (Quoted by Pratt)

Ammu knows Velutha, son of Vellya Paapen- is a paravan who returns to Ayemenem after his years away from the home. At Ayemenem, Velutha secretly joins the communist party, which promises the salvation for the underdogs, and one day, by chance, Ammu sees along with her brother and children "Velutha marching with a red flag in a white shirt and mundu with angry veins in his neck" (71). The reaction of Ammu, as Rahel notices, is profoundly significant.

Rahel saw that Ammu had a film of perspiration on her forehead and upper lip, and that her eyes had become hard, like marbles.... (71-72)

Rahel wonders: "What had it all meant?" (72). It means that Ammu loves Velutha-heart and soul- for his indomitable spirit of protest which she also nurses in her heart but cannot voice. This coupled with the fact that Velutha is possibly the only man in Ayemenem who really loves her children and respects her, intensifies her fascination for him. A free woman experiences not only an awful feeling of disgust, loneliness, and futility, but she longs for companionship and togetherness more desperately than before. It is perhaps natural that Ammu with her trodden youth, oppressed existence and frustrated dreams should drift towards Velutha, a representative of the oppressed and marginalized and the two try to seek solace in each other's warmth. Both realize this in an epiphanic moment of self-recognition: "Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment" (176) when they realize that both of them have gifts to offer each other. By falling in love Ammu hopes to move to "a better happier place" (44).

Ammu loves by night the man whom her children, deprived of fatherly affection, love by day. For thirteen nights they meet and share their fragile, transient happiness. The "outmoded world-view" and "antiquated philosophy" (339) of an age-old tradition crumble like a rejected garbage shell as she links her fate, her love, madness and infinite joy to his. Both of them know their fate as they violate "Love Laws" (33) and enter into forbidden territory. So they stick to small things, small but unbearably precious pleasures. "Each time they part, they extract only a small promise from each other: "Tomorrow?" 'Tomorrow?' They knew that things could change in a day. They were right about that" (339). Here we see the presence of a rebel consciousness. Both live and function in a feudal society with little room for positive changes. Having acknowledged the fragility of their position, they remain committed to brief moments of togetherness. For them small things matter and in order to reinforce the argument, Arundhati Roy highlights that any defiance of a system will lead to hardship and madness. In her essay on "Adultery in life and Literature", Nayantara Sahgal observes that if desire for love and truth leads people to extra-marital relations, there is nothing wrong or condemnable in it. She points out: "What is right and what is wrong? What should we do or do? Perhaps both in India and in the permissive West the deciding factors before we act, or judge the actions of others, should be the aesthetics of a particular situation. Is it guided by love and aspiration or greed and gluttony? Is there truth and beauty in it or only the desire for gain?" (Sahgal).

History takes its toll for the violation of its sacrosanct and unchallengeable rules. All hell breaks loose as the loyal and superstitious Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father in a drunken feat profusely apologizes to his masters and discloses the nightly trysts of the lovers. The touchable community, including Ammu's family, consider it as the beginning of the end of the world, since the lovers had made the "unthinkable thinkable" (256). The wayward daughter was "locked away like the family lunatic in a medieval household" (252) and Velutha is arrested and charged with the rape of Ammu. The image of Ammu locked up or "locked away" (239) represents the triumph of patriarchal power and becomes an agonizing motif of the pitiful weakness of feminine endeavour. In Indian culture, it is expected of a woman to remain totally faithful to a man- alive or dead. Arundhati Roy has forcefully raised the question of woman's needs. Ammu-Velutha relationship is the only perfect kind of man-woman relationship, which germinates from the innermost core of two human hearts. Ammu's death in the novel, more than anything else, is a subject of great social significance. Arundhati Roy here mirrors the social predicament of women in India. She follows the protagonist from the childhood days to adolescence, to the experience of marriage, to a loving and caring mother to an estranged wife, to a rebel who challenges the hypocritical moral stand of the society.

5. CONCLUSION:

The God of Small Things is a description of how the small things in life build up, translate into people's behaviour and affect their lives. Roy through re-thinking and re-visioning has objectified the concept of power. Her chief argument is that power still concentrated in man is not due to his physical strength but his capability in being the prime manoeuvrer in the power-game. A woman has not emerged yet as a strong manipulator but her tenacity to fight the odds has demanded a change in the perception and creation of re-integrated females. Through her novel, she highlights the urgency of the reformations in order to change the fortune of women. Roy has exposed the hollowness and hypocrisy of the society where an unfortunate woman struggles to curve her space. The quintessence of Roy's argument is that only when men influenced by the values of feminism replace power with pleasure, competitiveness with co-operation, individualism with community and transcendence with the joys of living and re-order their priorities accordingly, can the world really change.

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