

BETWEEN THE WORLDS: GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND FEMINISM IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

Poulami Ganguly, Guest Lecturer in English, Bankura Christian College, Bankura,
West Bengal, India

Abstract:

Gender discrimination is very prevalent in India since the time immemorial. Women are subjugated and deprived by the male members. The women of earlier generation were merely the onlookers of all pervading patriarchy. Rather the women of contemporary period have launched a severe attack against patriarchy. Arundhati Roy's novel The God of Small Things exposes the history of struggle on the behalf of small things against someone Big. The women of older generation like Mammachi and her mother-in-law are oppressed but bear it up without resentment. Baby Kochamma exerts but becomes a helpless victim of it. The women of modern generation like Ammu and Rahel invalidate the courage to break the threads of patriarchy off but finally they become debunked.

Key Words: *Subjugation, Patriarchy, Oppression, Struggle of Women, Deprivation.*

Gender discrimination or the stereotypical representation of the women through art, literature and culture is quite prevalent in the history of human civilization since the age of the *Bible*. It is essentially a make-belief world of the patriarchal society that places women as the other, the surrogate, the negative. All the branches of knowledge like history, biology and cultural study define woman in terms of her body and womb but the feminists believe that “her body is not enough to define her; it has a lived reality only as taken on by consciousness through actions and within a society; biology alone cannot provide an answer to the question that concerns us: why is woman the *Other*” (Beauvoir 71). Feminism through its long history has sought to collapse the complacent certainties of patriarchal culture to eradicate sexist domination and to create a transformed universe. Arundhati Roy as a feminist exposes in novel *The God of Small Things* the exploitation and subjugation of three women characters like Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel succeeding three generations by their male counterparts.

Arundhati Roy in her Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) enacts the hopes, aspiration, ambition, moral dilemmas, anxiety and fear of women when they search for self-expression, individuality, independence within the rigid structure of marital and inter-gender relationship. While Mammachi and Baby Kochamma relinquish to patriarchal domination, Ammu and Rahel demur against it by breaking the love laws in Syrian Christian community and plunging in incestuous relationship respectively. The novel *The God of Small Things* proves itself to be a feminine narrative-written about females from feminine perspective in a discursive and diffusive language. The phonological, morphological and syntactic structures of the novel are not a unified entity that substantiates the claim of Luce Irigaray about a feminine narrative - the preoccupation with correct meanings and a unified subject or struggle for unity is a male characteristic while the feminine characteristics are marked by plurality and diversity. The story of oppression continues through the sufferings of Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and her daughter Rahel.

The old house in Ayemenem has become the fulcrum through which patriarchy operates. Mammachi clemently bears the vehemence of Pappachi in every aspect of her life. She hurts the wounded pride of her Imperial Entomologist husband because of her excellent skill in violin. All the lessons of

learning violin were abruptly discontinued and her violin was broken down “when Mammachi's teacher, Launsky-Tieffenthal, made the mistake of telling Pappachi that his wife was exceptionally talented and, in his opinion, potentially concert class” (Roy 50). He is jealous of his wife's charm and beauty. While he is old, Mammachi is still in her prime youth and vigour. After his retirement from government job in Delhi they came back to Ayemenem where Mammachi thrives in comparison with her male-counterpart with her dexterity and perseverance in making pickles and jam. Consequently, in Kottayam Bible society fair Mammachi is ordered to prepare pickle and jam that sell well transforming her small kitchen into a pickle factory for good. But Pappachi never puts forward his hand to assist his mistress because “he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high-ranking ex-Government official” (47). Rather he slouches around the compound “watching Mammachi supervises the buying, the weighting, the salting and drying, of limes and tender mangoes” (47). In his frenzy he beats his mistress and “the beatings were not new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place” (48). The ego comes in between the couples and their marital life is at stake. To Pappachi women are “only the wanton solace of men, when they become so weak in mind and body that they cannot exert themselves unless to pursue some frothy pleasure, or to invent some frivolous fashion” (Wollstonecraft 14).

The history of oppression is going on since time immemorial; only the mode of oppression changes with the passage of time. Mammachi moulds herself to perfectly suit this purpose. Being rescued by Chacko, “Mammachi packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko's care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love” (168). But she could not put up with Chacko's wife Margaret. Owing to her snobbish nature she execrates Margaret's working class background and intends during Margaret's visit to India at Christmas not to resuscitate her sexual relationship with Chacko. It affects her pride and apprehension for her son. She is aware of Chacko's libertine relationship with women of the factory and simply terms it as a 'Man's Need'. In spite of being herself a victim of sexual exploitation she never makes any effort to desist it, rather encourages it having “a separate entrance built for Chacko's room... so that the objects of his Needs wouldn't have to go traipsing through the house” (169). Moreover, she bequeaths money to the working class women to dis sever lust from love and needs from feelings. The women also took the money under compulsion to survive their children and family. Mammachi foolishly takes Margaret for granted as the same working class whore who willingly takes money for her body. She imprudently puts the money in Margaret's pockets with the intention of adjoining her status to that of a demimondaine. She bears up her son's 'Need' but could not keep the same patience of the mind coming to know of her daughter's sexual relationship with the black Paravan. Her tolerance of 'Men's Need' on the part of her son becomes the fuel for her connoption at her daughter. Very consciously as a parent Mammachi cooperates in the oppressive socialization that “makes women suppress the greater part of their human potential” (Singh 20).

Like Mammachi Baby Kochamma proves to be a hapless victim of patriarchy and later herself becomes an archetype of it. In her younger days she falls in love with Father Mulligan, the Irish monk, who “was more than merely flattered by the emotion he aroused in the attractive young girl who stood before him with a tremble, kissable mouth and blazing coal- black eyes” (23). Being frustrated in love she goes restless and unhappy in a Father Mulligan less world and subverts the totalitarian state of patriarchy, “displaying a stubborn single- mindedness (which in a young girl in those days was considered as bad as a physical deformity- a harelip perhaps, or a club foot), Baby Kochamma defied her father's wishes and became a Roman Catholic” (24). Man-made society does not accede to a young woman's religious conversion in such an abrupt way. Thus Baby Kochamma's father, Reverend Ipe, soon discerns that his daughter's love has so stigmatized her honour that she fails to find a suitable husband in Syrian Christian community. Apart from marriage the only druthers for a girl is education. Hence, he decides that “since she couldn't have a husband there was no harm in her having an education” (26).

Later like a patriarch Baby Kochamma herself turns out as a tool of afflict upon the twins of Ammu,

a divorced daughter from an intercommunity marriage. She looks down on Rahel and Estha because they are doomed, father-less waifs. Baby Kochamma resents Ammu, a woman of independence and spirit, “because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman” (45). She has intrigued to murder Velutha in the Police Custody because of her extreme hatred to the flourishing Paravan. This countenance of her character is explicitly limned by Amitabh Roy in the following terms:

It's 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 fulfillment to her. (62)

Unlike Baby Kochamma Ammu, the protagonist of the novel suffers intolerably from the childhood to maturity within the shackles of all pervasive patriarchy and struggles against it. The inward psychological void transforms her into an oppressed who suffers from the duality- “They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it” (Freire 5). The story of her tragic life has started from early childhood being beaten and bullied by her father who turns out a philanthropic apparently. Growing up with this cold calculating cruelty she has “developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big” (182). Tattered and battered she anticipates a marriage proposal only to evade the raw deal. But very unfortunately the institution of marriage appears as an organization of infliction and torture to her as she is beaten and insinuated by the drunken and brutal husband who works in a tea-estate. In spite of her utmost endeavours she backs the wrong horse. Patriarchy operates even through the institution of marriage, “the destiny, traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being” (Beauvoir 444).

Ammu suffers from both for not being married and also for being married. In her premarital life after Pappachi's retirement she is not sent to the college because college education for girls is always thought to be an extravagance but her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford to continue further course of study. Thus “the patriarchal tradition imposed certain social ideals and standards on women” (Moi 209). Like a 'New woman' Ammu grows desperate to get rid of her bitter father and long suffering mother and ties a knot with an assistant manager of a tea estate who later emerges as a violently drunken bully and even ready to sell his wife to his employer in exchange of money. Ammu here again transgresses the moral law code of a *pativrata* and defies both her husband and the sexual addiction of Mr. Hollick, finally coming back to Ayemenem with her twins “to everything that she had fled from only a few years ago” (42). Though Estha and Rahel were at times 'millstones', but Ammu with her utmost power of affection brings them up as a single mother; she becomes their *Baba* and loves them “more than double” (149).

Ammu as well as her twins has to live on the sufferance of Ayemenem house, the house of her father, where a married daughter has no claim. In India women have “very limited freedom... Either society, religion or traditions control them and more often than not religion, traditional morality is used to exclude women from power and knowledge and reinforce patriarchal authority” (Jain 84). In case of Ammu it is traditional morality interdicting her. Baby Kochamma often asserts the condition of a divorced daughter in her parental home in this vulgar and repulsive manner:

A married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter ...she had no position anywhere at all. And for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a divorced daughter from an intercommunity love marriage-Baby Kochamma chose to remain quaveringly silent on the subject (45-46).

Though Ammu and Chacko share the same burden of work in the factory, she as a daughter has no claim over the property. Only Chacko, a male member of the society, can say, “What is yours is mine and what's mine is also mine” (57). Chacko's outspoken words 'my factory', 'my pineapples', 'my pickles' epitomize his arrogance and pride solely. Chacko thus stands for the masculine force, Ammu the opposite. The

watershed between the two opposite forces can aptly be described through Simon de Beauvoir's words:

The terms masculine and feminine are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity... A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. (15)

Ammu appears as the epitome of 'New Women' having the spirit and courage "to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield" (Tennyson 69) confronting the dominant ideology of the existing power-structure. Like a ubiquitous person Ammu responds to her sexual urge and makes love with Velutha, the untouchable. She stands beside him against the entire world and does not leave him at stake up to the moment of Velutha's death. When Velutha was in the Police custody being falsely alleged of the murder of Sophie Moll, Ammu runs to the Kottayam police station to save him. But all her earnest efforts are bound to be failure as it is the custom of the Police not to "take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children" (8). Atrocities on women are increasing day by day even by the Police. Inspector Thomas Mathew dares to continuously tap Ammu's breasts with his baton as if he is choosing mangoes from a basket. Thus she is physically assaulted in the Police station but still courageously fights against all sorts of insinuations. Ammu-Velutha relationship evinces a protest against the ideologies of marriage, family, society, religion and above all love- laws that dictate "who should be loved, and how. And how much" (33). But she is bowed down in her spirit by her own kith and kins like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. Mammachi's empathy to her son and antipathy to the daughter is evident through her conducts. While Chacko was in England and fell in jeopardy due to lack of money, the mother secretly pawns the jewellery and arranges money for him. Chacko returns from England without taking the intended degree; she joyfully welcomes him back but the mother leaves no stone unturned to insinuate her daughter coming to home being divorced. Baby Kochamma intrigues to make her own niece homeless and places her as the culprit in the death of Sophie Mol, the dearest daughter of a male counterpart of the household. Chacko immediately orders her, "pack your things and leave" (302) which Ammu has to obey as "the courage of man is shown in commanding of a woman in obeying" (Lerner 11). Consequently the outcome of this order is severe- the separation of a mother from her own children, the estrangement of a daughter from her own parental home. In her days of depression Ammu who has never crossed the boundary of school, thinks of becoming a school teacher, the only respectable job for a woman in Indian society. She thinks of earning money only being in a daily hubbub of current crises. Thus the subordination continues because "in this system women's labour power, women's reproduction, women's sexuality, women's mobility and property and other economic sources - are under patriarchal control" (Walby 20). The story of her struggle continues through her work as a receptionist in a dingy hotel which eventually results in her death at the age of thirty-one; "not old; not young; but a viable die-able age" (3).

The politics of power runs even after her death as the church refuses to bury her dead body. In this vulnerable, make-believe world of women the exploitation continues "through the institutions such as the academy, the church and the family, each of which justifies and reinforces women's subordination to men" (Millett 35). Ammu is never concerned to eliminate the differences between the two sexes that is very deep rooted in conventional Indian society nor she is concerned with the equal opportunity of both the sexes; She wants "the individual right to find out the kind of person...she is and to strive to become that person" (Carden 2).

Though the world of religion advocates equal right for both men and women but religion as an ideology is sometimes affected by the meanings, symbols and behaviours within society- a complex cultural system. The world of religion today maintains male social dominance within social structures. As Rahel and Estha have a Keralite mother and a Bengali father, they are half Hindu hybrids whom, to quote

Baby Kochamma, “no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry” (45). Mammachi segregates them as they are offspring of divorced parents. Not only in the house but also in the school Rahel is quarantined as she “didn't know how to be a girl” (17). She has been expelled from school three times; the first being Nazareth Convent from which she is driven out for decorating a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers and then after repeated complaints from the senior girls against whom she collides to perceive the sensation of breasts; the second cause of expulsion is due to smoking and the third for setting fire to her housemistress's false hair bun. All these 'perverted quality or moral perversion' within Rahel is a replica of internal struggle against moral law codes of man-made society where “the state has a systematic bias towards patriarchal interests in its policies and actions” (Walby 21).

Rahel grows up without any reinforcement; there is nobody to arrange a marriage paying dowry for her. She lacks affection and predilection of a family. Her father leaves her; her mother has died prematurely; she is estranged from the other zygotic twin; the maternal uncle has emigrated to Canada; Baby Kochamma leads an essentially self-concerned life. So the mental suffering on her part is the natural outcome as patriarchy tears her apart. After finishing the school she enters into a college of Architecture in Delhi and spends long eight years without taking her degree being avoided by her professors and friends who never invite her “to their nice homes or noisy parties” (18). Though she occasionally writes to her home but she never comes back to Ayemenem on such occasions like death of Mammachi or emigration of Chacko to Canada. Things happen to change in her life when Larry McCaslin finds a 'jazz tune' in her and marries. She marries without any ambition of wifehood and motherhood; she “drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge” (18). She could not find solace in the institution of marriage as it considers women's bodies as repositories of history and memory, as performative of gender, as the object of regulation and control, as victims of sexual exploitation and murder. Whenever Larry McCaslin cuddles her, he is disgusted by the passivity of her sexual organ and her empty, hollow looks but fails to realize “that the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other” (20).

It is Estha only with whom Rahel can be in perfect unison because of their disturbed childhood suffocating within the shackles of patriarchy. So Rahel hearing the news of Estha returning to Ayemenem, she gives up the job at the gas station and leaves America. When she sees Estha in Ayemenem house after long twenty three years later, she watches him as “a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin” (93). She searches for Estha's nakedness. Estha's body has the power to snatch its senses into deeper more inaccessible recess which is connected to Rahel's body and mind. It is the trauma psychology that leads Rahel to develop incestuous relationship, thus making her transgressor of moral codes like Ammu. To quote Dr. Amarnath Prasad:

And it is trauma psychology that makes Rahel, a girl of taciturnity, who always wants to lead a life far from the din and bustle of crowded city. It is this psychology that engraves a permanent imprint in the innocent mind of Rahel who, later on, develops an incestuous relation. (123)

Arundhati Roy in this novel has disintegrated the myth about female sexuality by a long chalk. In Indian myths female bodies are seen passive, subjected only to please male sexual organs. Manu, the first man in Hindu mythology and the legendary author of *Manu Smriti*, altercates in favour of bondage on women's part as her life ought to be ruled by the father, husband and her son at three different phases having no freedom at all of her own. In this phallogocentric world penis stands for domination, power, authority and control. But in the world of Arundhati Roy it is the female body enjoying sexual pleasure as much as her male partner, thus establishing herself as a feminist writer and thinker. About the exposition of female sexuality Fetterley rightly asserts, “It is by writing about their sexuality that woman writers can begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us” (Preface xxii).

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