

WIFE BEATING AND SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* AND *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*

K.Thangaraj

Asst.Professor (English)

Department of Social Sciences

Anbil Dharmalingam Agricultural College & Research Institute

Tamil Nadu Agricultural University

Navalur Kuttapattu,

Trichy - 620 009.

India.

Dr. M.H.Mohamed Rafiq

Associate Professor of English,

Jamal Mohamed College,

Trichy – 21

Abstract

Women experience discrimination and unequal treatment in terms of basic right to food, health care, education, employment, control over productive resources, decision-making and livelihood not because of their biological differences or sex, which is natural but because of their gender differences which is a social construct. This paper explores how Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, both the Booker winning Indian women writers deal with the women issues in their works, *The God of Small Things* and *The Inheritance of Loss* respectively.

Keywords: wife beating, women oppression, Booker, The God of Small Things, The Inheritance of Loss

Wife beating and subjugation of women is one of the commonest themes in Indian writings in English. Merriam Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus defines oppression as “unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power; something that oppresses especially in being an unjust or excessive exercise of power; a sense of being weighed down in body or mind”. Subjugation includes marital violence, wife beating, intimidation and abuse of women. Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, both the Booker Prize winning Indian women novelists, deal this theme with right attention.

It is a commonly held view in the patriarchal society which upholds oppressive maxim of women such as “its men's world”, “women are weaker sex”, “women are basically biological beings”, “a cow will not be obedient without beatings” and so on. Sigmund Freud stated that for women ‘anatomy is destiny’ and women’s biology determine their psychology and so their abilities and roles. Similarly the conventional idea of ‘public-private divide’ believed that sexual inequality is natural.

Jejeebhoy considers that violence against women is a widely accepted form of behaviour, viewed as a women's due, and her husband's right. In her research study, *Wife-Beating in Rural India: A Husband's Right?*, she concludes “over three in four women consider wife-beating a justifiable form of behaviour. Wife-beating is not only considered as an acceptable form of society, but a 'right' form of behaviour in a variety of conditions, including the neglect of household chores, and failure to obey her husband.” She further considers that the root cause for the violence against women is “Women’s Powerlessness” – economic, political and social power.

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* have successfully furnished the rotten systems of dowry, wife-beating and intimidation, the most endemic and widespread forms of violence prevailing in India. Roy exposes the second rated treatment of women through the character of Pappachi and Desai in her presentation of Jemubhai Patel.

Pappachi is jealous of his wife’s sudden development in pickle making business, which he considers inferior to the wife of an ex-government official like him. He is indignant of Mammachi, who was suddenly receiving attention from everyone through her pickle making business. He used to beat his wife Mammachi brutally with a brass flower vase. “The beatings were not 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” (GST, 48) because he couldn’t bear Mammachi’s pleasure deriving from playing the violin.

While beating Mammachi, once he was prevented by his son Chacko, who caught his father’s vase-hand and twisted it around his back and informed him that he doesn’t like to see it again. Thereafter, Pappachi never touched his wife and stopped to speak with anyone in the family and he never spoke with his wife till his death. He bought a second hand Plymouth car and rode alone, never allowing his family members to travel in it, “The Plymouth was Pappachi’s revenge” (GST, 48). Yet, Pappachi was charming and urbane with visitors and donated money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But to his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father.

As a child, Ammu had learned very quickly to disregard the Father Bear Mother Bear stories she was given to read. In her version, “Father Bear beat Mother Bear with brass vases. Mother Bear suffered those beatings with mute resignation” (GST, 180).

Subjugation of women includes not only marital violence and wife beating, but also intimidation of children and child abuse. Pappachi didn’t spare her girl child Ammu also. Once he beat Mammachi and Ammu and driven them out of their home:

“On one such night, Ammu, aged nine, hiding with her mother in the hedge, watched Pappachi’s natty silhouette in the lit windows as he flitted from room to room. Not content with having beaten his wife and daughter, he tore down curtains, kicked furniture and smashed a table lamp... While Ammu watched, the Imperial Entomologist shred her new gumboots with her mother’s pinking shears... It took ten minutes for her beloved gumboots to be completely shredded. When the last strip of rubber had rippled to the floor, her father looked at her with cold, flat eyes, and rocked and rocked and rocked. Surrounded by a sea of twisting rubber snakes” (GST, 181).

As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty. She 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. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them.

Roy presents that this evil practise is prevailing among the ordinary people like Kathakali men also used to beat their wives after their performance of the dance that they consider it as a way of emotional outlet. “The Kathakali Men took off their makeup and went home to beat their wives. Even Kunti, the soft one with breasts” (GST, 236). Women’s autonomy, particularly financial autonomy and freedom of movement substantially reduces their risk of experiencing physical violence with marriage”, says Sabarwal.

This kind of violence is linked due to women’s disadvantageous position in the society. The perpetrators of domestic violence have often been found to be the males and the victims are their sexual partners. Heise found, “Internationally one in three women have been beaten, coerced into sex or abused in their lifetime by a member of her own family.”

It is always the women who have to be in the tight rope, subject to inequality and looked down as an inferior sex. Starting from childhood to the end of her life she has to be under the control of a male counterpart -her father or husband or her son. The subordinate status of women, according to Sahoo is combined with socio cultural norms that are inclined towards patriarchy and masculinity can be considered as an important factor determining the domestic violence.

Since there are certain reasons for wife beating, Sahoo lists out the reasons: “wife neglects house or children, wife goes without telling husband, wife shows disrespect for in-laws and husband suspects wife is unfaithful.” In Pappachi’s case, the ego and the superiority of the masculine arrogance force him to stretch at his fist; whereas in Jemu’s case, Nimi’s reluctance to be a modern girl rather than disobedience makes her to be a victim for domestic violence. According to a study conducted by Sahoo, fifty percent of ever-married women accept and justifies with at least one reason for wife beating.

When Nimi was sent to her parent’s home by Jemu, her uncle advised her to go to the home of her husband. “You are your husband’s responsibility...Go back. Your father gave a dowry when you married – you got your share and it is not for daughters to come claiming anything thereafter. If you have made your husband angry, go ask for forgiveness.” (IL, 306) Jemu fails to understand his wife. Like Pappachi, he appeared to the outer world that he was a wonderful husband.

Surajita Ray in her *Understanding Patriarchy* says, “Women are not only treated as subordinate to men but are also subject to discriminations, humiliations, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence. Women experience discrimination and unequal treatment in terms of basic right to food, health care, education, employment, control over productive resources, decision-making and livelihood not because of their biological differences or sex, which is natural but because of their gender differences which is a social construct. As Chacko said, “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” for which Ammu reacts, “thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society” (GST, 57)

Roy adopts parallel technique to compare and contrast of men and women in our society. Ammu and Chacko, the sister and brother who lived in the same house have married out of their own community. Ammu was married to a Hindu, her brother Chacko has married a British girl. Both of their married life ends with broken relationship and divorce. Ammu paid a big price for her divorce. Ammu’s aunt Baby Kochamma subscribed the commonly held view,

“a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter-according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a divorced daughter from a intercommunity love marriage–Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject.” (GST, 45-46)

But Chacko has enjoyed a lot of privileges, since he is a man. He flirted with the women workers in the pickle factory, called pretty women to his room on the pretext of making them aware of labour rights and trade union law. He forced them to sit on the table with him and drink tea, took them to Allepy to teach classes on trade union, took them for a bus ride and boat ride, and offered them glass bangles and flowers. The poor workers had no option than obeying their master’s order. 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.” (GST, 65) Mammachi has made a special entrance for her son Chacko to fulfil his ‘men’s needs’, whereas she couldn’t even imagine the relationship of her daughter Ammu with Velutha.

While happily accepting her son’s libertine relationship with the factory workers, Mammachi turned her nose at Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, and compares it with animals, “*Like a dog with a bitch on heat.*” (GST, 258)

As it is manifested by Kate Millet in ‘Sexual Politics’, the sexual relationship of Nimi in *The Inheritance of Loss* is controlled by her husband Jemubhai Patel. For Millet, Sex is the tool, through which Jemubhai achieves his patriarchal domination. Millet defined sexual politics as the arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. Jemu’s relatives asked the his first night experience with his wife, for which Jemu answered negatively,

“Next morning, the uncles laughed. “What happened? Nothing?” They gestured at the bed.

More laughter the next day.

The third day, worry.

“Force her,” the uncles urged him. “Insist. Don’t let her behave badly.”

“Other families would not be so patient,” they warned Nimi.

“Chase her and pin her down” the uncles ordered Jemubhai.” (IL, 91-92)

Jemu failed to understand the fragile feministic features of Nimi, the fourteen years old wife and he behaved violently with her in the bed that she cried in terror to save. Women, according to Beauvoir “have been taught to accept masculine authority. So she gives up criticizing, investigating, judging for herself, and leaves all these to the superior caste.” Whether she is a wife, a prostitute, a courtesan, or a Hollywood star, a woman who loves for the favour of men is still a prisoner, for her sex imprison her.

Nimi Patel, the neglected ‘second sex’ of Simon de Beauvoir, has been forced to be an obeying Indian girl inside the home by serving loyally to her husband and allowing him to ‘undress and redress’ to remember the ‘memory of closeness of female flesh’ (IL, 38) as soon as he got married. She had the apparently inherent qualities of a woman – weakness, feeble mindedness, patience and so on.

Nimi is a woman of emotional kind. She had no job, no power, no place of pleasure, no right to make hair bun, even to defecate her convenience. When Jemu finds foot prints on the toilet sheet he had brutally beaten his wife. The physical and mental tortures make her invalid.

Once Nimi, due to her ignorance, soiled the toilet seat, for what Jemu ‘took her head and pushed it into the toilet bowl’ (IL, 173), and after a point, Nimi becomes psychologically invalid by the continuous misery and torture.

Unlike the wives of other government officials, she had not played any role in her husband’s career and did not accompany him on tours. Even she was insulted by the servants of the house, who ‘thumped their own left overs on the table for her to eat, stole the supplies without fear... (IL, 172) The real or the perceived humiliation of Jemubhai is transmitted to his wife. He attempted his wife to make an Anglophile, whereas she has made up her mind not to learn. Instead of a pop cut, she preferred hair bun. The pungency of her red hair oil annoyed him and the tinkling sound of the bangles of his wife irritated him and he instructs to “take those absurd trinkets off.” (IL, 172)

When Jemu takes his wife to his working place Banda, his sexual encounter becomes worst and it is compared with ‘the same blank look of a dog or monkey humping in the bazaar’ (IL, 170) “All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water and so do animals” remarks Carol J.Adams, in her *The Sexual Politics of meat*. “Animals are consumed literally, women are consumed visually”, she adds and so Jemu to his wife Nimi.

The negative response that Jemu received from the English is turned towards his wife. He hated his own dark skin and so he applied a lot of rose powder. Once he missed his precious possession, the imported powder puff, and he found it sticking out of his wife’s blouse. He couldn’t tolerate this act of his ‘illiterate village’ wife. With a murderous look he chased her down on the floor and in blind fury he raped her:

“Ghoulishly sugared in sweet candy pigment, he clamped down on her, tussled her to the floor and ... in a dense frustration of lust and fury— penis uncoiling, mottled purple-black as if with rage...he stuffed his way ungracefully into her.” (IL, 169)

The repeated ‘gutter act’ (IL, 170) has unmasked his originality and his lustful character. Again and again he did this cruel activity to ‘teach her the same lessons of loneliness and shame he had learned himself’ (IL, 170) and proves the words of Adams.

As he was mocked for his English pronunciation in England, she forced his wife to learn English from an Anglo Indian lady Miss Enid Pott. But his attempt to Anglicize her has failed and he lost his patience and found her ‘rudely contradicting ambition.’ (IL, 172) He was ashamed of his uneducated wife and he didn’t take her anywhere outside. Neglected by her husband and insulted by the servants, Nimi led a lonely life within the confines of his official bungalow and gradually fell out of life. Shagun Sabarwal suggests that education and employment reduce the risk of marital violence.

Men, irrespective of the cadre, have ‘masculinity’ in them. When Sai had enquired the cook if her grandfather Jemu had really loved his wife very much, the cook praised that he must have.

“But they said he didn’t show it.” “Maybe he didn’t?” she then suggested.

“Bite your tongue, you evil girl. Take your words back!” shouted the cook.

“Of course he loved her.”

You are a very foolish girl. The greatest love is love that’s never shown.” (IL, 87)

The cook continued to narrate the ancestry of Nimi that she was the daughter of a rich man and the family was of much higher standing than your grandfather, and her complexion is just like milk and one could have mistaken her for a foreigner.

When Nimi's cheeks erupting in pustules, her husband took her fallen beauty as a further affront and felt concerned the skin disease would infect him as well. He instructed his servants to wipe everything with Dettol to kill germs. He powdered himself extra carefully with his new puff, each time remembering the one that had been cushioned between his wife's 'obscene, clown-nosed breasts' (IL, 173) asking her not to show her face outside that people might run.

Nimi had once participated in a rally to welcome Nehru at the railway station. This act of Nimi had enraged him and asked a series of questions to his wife, if she was a country bumpkin? Was she a liar? Was she playing foolish female games? Was she trying deliberately to make him angry? Or was she just incredibly stupid? When she maintained silence, Jemu asked in a threatening tone, which of the above? To his amazed ears and her own shocked ears, as if waking up to a moment of clarity before death, she said: "You are the one who is stupid." (IL, 304) The exasperated judge

"Emptied his glass on her head, sent a jug of water swinging into the face he no longer found beautiful, filled her ears with leaping soda water. Then, when this wasn't enough to assuage his rage, he hammered down with his fists, raising his arms to bring them down on her again and again, rhythmically, until his own hands were exhausted and his shoulders next day were strained sore as if from chopping wood. He even limped a bit, his leg hurting from kicking her". (IL, 304)

The more he swore, the harder he found he could hit. Then Nimi was sent to her father's home. After six months later, a telegram arrived from Nimi's uncle informing the arrival of a baby. Jemu didn't visit his daughter and wife. When Jemu's father pleaded him to get back Nimi, Jemu was stubborn and refused to accept his wife saying, "Why are you talking like this?... You're following the script of a village idiot. She is unsuitable to be my wife." (IL, 306) Nimi lived the rest of her life with her sister who also had an unsuccessful marriage. Her brother-in-law resented every bite that entered Nimi's mouth. After some years, Jemu received a second telegram, "A woman had caught fire over a stove." (IL, 307)

"Oh, this country, people exclaimed, glad to fall into the usual sentences, where human life was cheap, where standards were shoddy, where stoves were badly made and cheap saris caught fire as easily—
—as a woman you wanted dead or—
—well, as a woman who wanted to kill herself—
—without a witness, without a case—
—so simple, a single movement of the hand—
—and for the police, a case so simple..." (IL, 307)

"Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man", the words of Simon de Beauvoir is proved the life of Nimi. Jemu spent the rest of his life in the company of his cook and his dog Mutt. a decayed and crumbling estate in Kalimpong, situated at the north-eastern Himalayas. He made his wife and daughter into ashes, simply for the reason that they are women. It is apt to conclude with the words of Kiran Desai, "Ashes have no weight, they tell no secrets, they rise too lightly for guilt; too lightly for gravity, they float upward and, thankfully, disappear." (IL, 308)

REFERENCES

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Random House, 2009.
2. Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006.
3. Ellie, Behling. *Eating Meat is Chauvinistic*. The Post, Oct.20, 2004.
4. Gosh K. Tapan, *The Fiction of Kiran Desai*. New Delhi: Prestige, 2009.
5. Jejeebhoy J. Shireen. *Wife-Beating in Rural India: A Husband's Right? Evidence from Survey Data*, Economic and Political Weekly. 33(15). April 11, 1998. p.855-862.
6. Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago, 1977.
7. Nayar, K. Pramod. *Literary Theory Today*. New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2002.
8. Onyeukaziri, Justin Nnaemeka, *Women Oppression in a Patriarchal Society*, retrieved from <http://www.globalrp.org/women-oppression-in-a-patriarchal-society.html>
9. Ray, Sujitha. *Understanding Patriarchy, Notes for Foundation Course of Human Rights, Gender and Environment*. II BA Programme, University of Delhi. Online.
10. Sabarwal, Shagun et al. *Women's Autonomy and Experience of Physical Violence within Marriage in Rural India: Evidence from a Prospective Study*. Population council, New Delhi.
11. Sahoo, Harihar and Pradhan, Manas Ranjan. *Domestic Violence in India: An Empirical Analysis*. Centre for the study of Regional Development, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
12. Sinha, Sunita. *Indian Booker Prize Winners: A critical study of their works*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2010.
13. Smith, Jessica. *Speaker: Men see women as meat*. The Shorthorn, March 6, 2003.
14. Vlitos, Paul, Book Review *The Pornography of Meat*. Times Literary Supplement, Sep 12, 2003.
15. <http://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.in/2011/04/simone-de-beauvoirs-explanation-for.html>
16. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/states/karnataka/article3873676.ece>
17. <http://www.hercircleezine.com/2012/06/20/simone-de-beauvoirs-the-second-sex/>