

MARGINALISED AND OPPRESSED WOMEN IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to critically consider Arundhati Roy's novel from a postcolonial feminist perspective, with a special focus on how she models different representations of women. The purpose of exploring how Roy fictionally constructs marginalized and oppressed women and their resistance against inequalities will be reached by studying four main female characters - Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*. Roy presents these female characters with diverse representations of subalterns, who despite their oppressed and marginalised status display agency. The novelist analyses the gendered oppression through the examination of the marital and inter gender relations of women. They are placed at different levels in their march towards emancipation. In their attempt to challenge the customs, laws, values of social and cultural boundaries, some of them commit moral transgression which ultimately leads them towards their demise and destruction. They try to bring out change by mounting resistance against both local and global inequalities.

Keywords: Marginalization, Oppression, Resistance, Subalterns.

Arundhati Roy is an acclaimed Indian novelist to have bagged the Booker prize for 'The God of Small Things' which was published in 1997. Roy has a sensitive understanding of her female characters. She takes us inside the consciousness of her women characters to present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions. There is a continuous struggle within their selves to seek out of their confined territories and to interpret their lives with individual freedom. They suffer oppression in the patriarchal world order, but they don't cry or suffer in isolation. Rather they try to bring about a change through resistance which takes shape of transgression behaviour. They make efforts to interrogate the structures of caste, clan and gender in an implicit as well as an explicit manner. It focuses on how women relate to other women but also to different kinds of men.

In the description of Kerala in her novel, there are several layers of oppression stemming from colonialism, religion and caste structures which are often intertwined and serve as a complex oppressive system that is sometimes difficult to dissect. Throughout the novel, Roy depicts the oppression of Indian culture through the sexuality of the subaltern; she accomplishes this by juxtaposing individuals of different caste and class within three generations: the generation which accepts the oppression, the generation which rebels against the oppression, and the generation living in the wake of the rebellion. Such variants of resistant are articulated through the examination of the marital and inter-gender relations of Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel.

It could be worth noting here that women's voices have indeed been marginalized in postcolonial India. The structures of power and oppression are often referred to and discussed by Roy in the novel, but the individual perspective is never being neglected. One interpretation of Roy's novel is that it is an exploration of subaltern agency on the margin because it focuses on men and women and children who struggle for their right to possess a voice of their own.

Mammachi is from a Syrian Christian family and wife to the late Pappachi who hit her regularly with a brass-vase, leaving 'crescent shaped' scars on her skull. "He beat her constantly for no apparent reason, the beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place" (TGST, p. 47-48). She possesses the adept business skills and starts a pickle factory all by herself, but her inferiority to her husband becomes clear when the narrator states that "Pappachi would not help [Mammachi] with the pickle-making because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high-ranking ex-Government official"(TGST, p. 46). Towards her husband, she displays the mentioned idealized 'suffering wife' attitude, submits herself to him. She remains committed to her husband until his death and even cry at his funeral - not necessarily because she loves him but because she has been committed to him for so long. The narrator states, "At Pappachi's funeral, Mammachi cried.... Ammu told the twins that Mammachi was crying more because she was used to him than because she loved him. She was used to having him slouching around the pickle factory, and was used to being beaten from time to time" (TGST, p. 49).

Mammachi projects her repressed anger at other people but she is submissive towards people whom she considers to be superior to her, like her husband, and oppressive to people she regards as inferiors, like Ammu and her children. She tries to cover her oppressive tendencies and be liberal and a good Christian towards untouchables for instance, in fact, she regards untouchables as being deeply inferior and she is firmly rooted in the hierarchical caste system of her culture. This becomes very clear in her treatment of Velutha when he crosses the forbidden line in having a relationship with her own touchable daughter, When Velutha's father comes to the kitchen door to inform her about the love affair, Mammachi starts to scream hysterically, pushes him off the steps into the mud and spits at him, yelling loses her senses completely. She "spewed her blind venom, her crass, insufferable insults" (TGST, p. 268) at him and used such an incredibly foul language that no one had ever heard her use before. The last thing Mammachi says to Velutha before he leaves is: "If I find you on my property tomorrow I'll have you castrated like the pariah dog that you are! I'll have you killed!"(TGST,p. 269). The utterances show how strong the ideology of caste and difference is to Mammachi, overriding by far her religious beliefs.

However, Mammachi begins to develop an underlying love for her son. After Chacko prevents Mammachi's husband from beating her, he becomes "the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love"(TGST, p. 160). The author uses Mammachi's submissiveness

in marriage and unnatural affections toward her son to illustrate the oppression of the subaltern in Indian society. After Pappachi's death, Chacko, her son took over the factory from her and in losing her factory; Mammachi was marginalized in terms of both clan and gender. According to Chacko's philosophy "what's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (TGST, p. 57). Mammachi never even confronts Chacko about his female visitors, she simply adjusts to it. She sees to it that a separate entrance to Chacko's room is built so that his female visitors will not have to pass through the house. She even gives the ladies money secretly, an act that allows her to think of them as whores instead of as lovers. When Baby Kochamma complains to Mammachi about the female visitors, Mammachi defend Chacko by saying that he cannot help having a "Mans Needs" (TGST, p. 160). Binayak Roy describes Mammachi as a "Big Woman who deifies her son Chacko and despises her daughter Ammu" (B. Roy, p.60). The critic continues to address Mammachi's favouritism for her son by stating that Mammachi "makes all arrangements for the satisfaction of Chacko's sexual needs with Paravan women. However, she becomes furious at Ammu's affair with the Paravan Velutha." (B. Roy, p.60). Mammachi's liberal, forgiving attitude towards her son does not apply to her daughter and her extramarital relationship. The knowledge that Ammu has "defiled generations of breeding" (TGST, p. 244) by having a relationship with a Paravan is unbearable to Mammachi. This shows that Ammu and Chacko are definitely not measured by the same standards due to their gender.

Baby Kochamma, from a young age, has loved Father Mulligan, an Irish monk who is studying Hinduism in India. According to Binayak Roy, "The beautiful, headstrong eighteen-year-old Baby and the young, handsome Irish monk Father Mulligan fall passionately in love. But the 'Love Laws' operative from time immemorial, get in their ways"(B. Roy, p.59). In hopes of establishing a physical relationship with the monk, Baby Kochamma enters the nunnery. To win him, she converts herself to Roman Catholic faith but ultimately she is a failure and starts living in isolation in the Ayemenem house. Baby Kochamma is used to depict the oppression of woman through her sexuality, as well. Before bed each night, Baby Kochamma documents her love of Father Mulligan in her diary by writing "*I love you I love you*" (TGST, p. 281). Under the established laws of love, Baby experiences oppression as illustrated by her frustrated sexuality. According to O.P. Dwivedi, "[Ammu's] daring love affair with Velutha undoubtedly incited a sexual desire in Baby Kochamma to some extent. She cannot digest this affair as she herself is denied the carnal pleasure" (Dwiwedi, p.393). The author shows the marginalisation and oppression of women of Indian Society through events which stem Baby Kochamma's Sexual frustration. Baby Kochamma's sexual frustration leads to her later disastrous actions, in which out of her sexual jealousy she invokes police involvement in the affair between Ammu and Velutha. She embodies a mixture of wilfulness and adaption towards her family's customs and traditions but most of all she is a significantly shrewd lady and a master in the skill of manipulation and conspiracy. She pities herself and is jealous of other people, for instance Ammu. She does not spare any chances to make Ammu and her twins understand that a divorced daughter does not have the right to live in her parents' house. She is in her youth quite rebellious in the sense, she both opposes the tradition of arranged marriages by independently choosing a man, and then even converting to Catholicism against her father's will. Later in life she apparently becomes more conservative, and accepts her hard fate as a 'Man-less woman' while condemning others who break the rules like she once did.

From a young age, the treatment she gets in her family, Ammu acquires "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" (TGST, p. 172-173). During a visit to a distant relative in Calcutta,

she accepts a marriage proposal from a Bengali Hindu man and manages to escape her abusive father and suppressed and wretched mother. Her husband works as a tea estate assistant manager but unfortunately he turns out to have severe alcoholic problems. Veena Shukla states that in order to escape the circumstances at home, Ammu marries "an alcoholic husband, who treats her in a beastly manner, and even asks her to satisfy the carnal pleasure of his boss, so that he can keep his job secure" (Shukla, p.965). Because of his husband's strange behaviour and the treatment given to her, situation becomes so painful and unbearable that Ammu is forced to divorce him. After a couple of year, she divorces him.

In order to escape the horrors of her marriage, Ammu moves back to Ayemenem with twins - Estha and Rahel. She returned 'unwelcome to her parents in Ayemenem'(TGST, p. 42). Her own house turns out to be a horrid place for her and she is subject to humiliation, insults and mental blows by her own family members. Her father does not even believe her when she tells him about how her former husband wanted to sell her like a prostitute to save his job. Mammachi is also quite discontent with her rebellious daughter, and Baby Kochamma despises her more than anyone else because she feels that Ammu is "quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (TGST, p. 44).

Ammu's marginalization is also quite obvious; she is divorced woman with two children to take care of. Ammu's brother reminds her children that their mother has no 'Locus standi', no legal rights to inherit the factory or the house for instance. Intentionally or not, he pronounces the word 'Locust Stand I', making it sound like Locust, a grasshopper, perhaps implying that their mother is more or less a kind of parasite in the Ayemenem household. She is also cornered by the other family members and her being treated as an outcast in her own family clearly defines her position in the family and society. Ammu carries the feeling that her life has been lived and that she really has not much to lose. She has developed a "lofty sense of injustice" and straightforwardness that makes her sees things a bit differently than her mother and aunt do. The repeated rejections of Ammu by her own kith and kin compel her to resist and she seeks emotional refuge in Velutha – a low caste who works as a carpenter in the pickle factory. A secret love affair develops between the two resulting in furtive sexual encounters which is the violation of the traditional norms of the Syrian Christian society. In this way, Ammu rebels against the oppression of Indian society through her sexuality.

Ammu, so much suppressed by a social order, is faced against a system where her Marxist brother Chacko exploits the poor women labourers in his factory, both financially and sexually, and goes unchecked. Ammu's father is incredulous of the fact that her Bengali Hindu husband wanted to prostitute her in order to please his white boss. The patriarchal society is challenged by a subaltern woman in the novel who is economically and socially marginalized. Ammu rebels against the very social norms of this society. This is an act of resistance aimed at bringing about change in and around her. Amitabh Roy states: "Ammu, on the other hand, is the rebel who represents the defiance of the present [neo-colonial] state of society from educated [though marginalized and proletarianized], passionate and thinking women. She stands for those women who are aspiring for freedom and equality. This section of women is challenging traditional [pre-colonial] ideas and conventions. The hopes for the [post-colonial] future lie with this section only" (A. Roy, p.77-78). Although she may not consciously have worked for other subalterns, her brave fight contributes to the emancipation of different kinds of subalterns.

If Ammu is on the margin, her children are even more so. They are "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would even marry" (TGST, p. 44) in the eyes of Baby

Kochamma. Rahel is ‘The Die-vorced and the Barren’ in Roy’s novel, who endured all kinds of assaults from all corners in her life and struggled against all kinds of adversities. Rahel is the offspring of divorced parents, daughter of Ammu who is deprived of conventional parental love. She has to suffer from fatherlessness at a young age of two. She lives with the stigma of a mixed parent age, both religious and ethnic. She is disliked by her relatives. Being the victim of a dysfunctional family, she fails to connect with the people around her. After school education, she takes admission into a mediocre College of Architecture in Delhi without any thought or interest, there she meets Larry McCaslin, Who is collecting material for his Ph. D, marries him and goes to the U.S.A. But soon they were divorced. After that, she works as a waitress in an Indian restaurant in New York for a few months. Then Baby Kochamma informs her about Estha’s re-return to Ayemenem House. She immediately gives up her job and returns to Ayemenem, her birth place. Here she is ultimately disowned and rejected by the society. In a relationship with her brother, Rahel transgresses the traditional boundaries of a defined and social relationship. While Ammu has an illicit relationship with Velutha, Rahel indulges in a sexual relationship with her own brother and in a way, both transgress the social norms of the society. Their transgression is perhaps a deliberate act to defy and to challenge the society where in, they have to survive as the oppressed victims. The author uses sexuality of Rahel in an unexpected manner to expose the traumatic effects of the rebellion. The author's exposure of social ills through the sexuality of the subaltern is culminated in this final sexual act.

Arundhati Roy in ‘The God of Small Things’ presents women as subalterns and their marginalised and oppressive status in the society, but some of them try to bring about change through their resistance. However, these women mount resistance against both local and global inequalities. They interrogate the structures of caste, class and gender through their personal involvement in different issues, implicitly and explicitly. Ammu represents people who actually dare to do the unthinkable to transgress the very line that upholds the system of difference. She stands for those women who are aspiring freedom and equality.

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