

Gender Discrimination in ‘The God of Small Things’

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Abstract

The first and the most important source of power for the scheduled caste women are in their depressedness, the very nature of being scheduled caste. They belong to the original community which settled in India long before the influx of outsiders. That is why they are known as scheduled caste (untouchables), people who have been inhabitants of the soil from the beginning. Arunhati Roy as one of the prominent contemporary women writers in India takes us inside the consciousness of her modern educated middle class women characters to present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and confused and explore ways to fulfill themselves as a human beings. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations.

Arunhati Roy’s perception of women’s identity in Indian society during the contemporary period through some selected works. This unfolds through a re-visitation from a contemporary Indian women perspective. The ongoing study has first and foremost highlighted the impacts of industrialization on Indian Kara lite women’s conditions. The second theme of this paper has consisted in showing how some of the fictional works authored by Arunhati Roy has depicted and portrayed the social injustice prevailing in Indian Karalite during the period under study.

Keywords-Women’s identity, Hopes, Fears, Aspirations, Frustrations, Female perspective, contemporary Indian women.

English education was introduced to India in the 19th century, serving as an ideological force behind social reform and control. Indian English Literature has developed over a period of time and writing in English did not start a day, it took many years and several prominent personalities helpful to bring the present status and distinct place to Indian English literature among world literature. Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand tried their best to give new identity to Indian Writing in English with the passage of time, Indian English literature has witnessed several changes in the writing pattern.

Women's Writing in India is about 2600 years old but it is really started with women questioning the images of women presented by male writers and seeking to combat them through their writing and bringing in a more humane and cultured way of conduct and behavior. Before women emerged as a major literary force, men created women in their perspective, prescribing norms for women to follow and displayed patriarchy that insisted on preserving sexual inequality between men and women. Women's writing emerges in shape by creating new opening for female novelists and writers to bring female literary tradition. It is just time that the literary world accept women writers as writers of, for and by humanity rather than pigeonhole them into separate category as though their writing are only about women and concerned with expressing their anguish, distress, concern and anger at their plight but now women writers have expanded their visions wider and they have taken issues facing present humanity such as Environment, Energy, Equality, Justice, Human Rights, Water, Peace, Racism, Violence, Fundamentalism, Religious, co-existence issues concerning us as human beings.

A woman as a subject matter in Indian fiction in English is not something recent but the approach of the novelists is certainly different. In the novel of the 1960s women in Indian fiction were depicted as ideal creatures having various virtues, with no concept of revolt while the later novels portray. Women are educated and conscious of their right and privileges demanding their proper place in society. Indisputably, recent years have witnessed the impact of western feminist theories put forward by writers like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1952)¹, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970)². Under these influences the Indian women writers have successfully made an attempt to break the literary and social norm of the past. They explore deep into the psyche of their characters and also herald a new concept of morality. At the outset writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha de, Bharati Mukherjee and some others have denied any sort of feminist bias in their writings but an

in depth analysis proves a strong feminist intent, for women's issue pertains to be the chief concern of their plot.

Arundhati Roy is one of the most popular writers in India, Indian women's writing hit a new high when Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for her 1997 debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, exploring forbidden love in Kerala and has been translated into more than forty languages. She was born in 1959 in Shillong, India, and studied architecture in Delhi, where she now lives. She has also written several non-fiction books, including *Field Notes on Democracy*, *Walking with the Comrades*, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, *The End of Imagination*, and most recently *Things That Can and Cannot Be Said*, co-authored with John Cusack. Arundhati Roy is the recipient of the 2002 Lannan Foundation Cultural Freedom Prize, the 2011 Norman Mailer Prize for Distinguished Writing, and the 2015 Ambedkar Sudar award. Arundhati Roy's second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), addresses some of the most devastating events in India's modern history. It has enjoyed a global release with enviable media hype, further demonstrating the remarkable progress in how women writing are received by critics and the public. Her literary works mostly delineate the themes of social justice and anguish that various social groups suffered.

Ammu is portrayed as a tragic figure, a woman struggling against her family, her motherhood and society. As Ranga Rao (*The Hindu*, Sep. 23rd 1997) puts it "In Ammu, the novelist has presented, with compassion, a woman, a feminist locked in a struggle with her family, its 'hidden morality' with society and tragically with herself. Her broken marriage, her unwantedness in her parental family has love for her children and her womanly desires lead her to her untimely death. These are not small things. These are terribly tyrannical forces against which she tries to rebel and thereby meets a tragic end."²

Reena Kothari in her article "*The Multiple Power Structure in Ayemenem*" observes that Chacko, Mr. K.N. Pillai, Inspector Thomas Mathew, Baby Kochamma, Pappachi Mammachi etc., are responsible for the destruction of small things. Reena Kothari says:

"Arundhati Roy introduces the power structure in society and shows how the more powerful victimize the less powerful as there is gender oppression, oppression of lower caste, subjugation of children, police atrocity and the hypocrite Marxist Leader Mr.Pillai who too doesn't leave the opportunity to oppress anybody for personal gains. Arundhati Roy's realistic sketch of her characters, be it Mammachi, Pappachi, Chacko or Baby Kochamma needs to be praised, for she scores well on his front. Multiple power structures remind us of our own society where such Chackos and Mammachis reside who exercise their power on the weak and less powerful" (136).³

Nazma Malik in his article “*The God of Small Things: A Study of English Influence on Indian Culture*” comes close to Kothari’s opinion by identifying the opposition of Indian and English dilemmas: “The Indian Vs. the English Dilemma is illustrated throughout the novel. The God of small things breathes with the spirit of modern youth. It attacks several holy cows like the Communist establishment, family, religion etc” (167).⁴

Examining the popularity brought to Kerala by this novel Indira Nityanandam in the article “*God’s Own Country: Kerala in the God of Small Things*” says:

“Kerala remains a vibrant, throbbing presence. We can clearly see that Roy excels in evoking the local flavor and integrating it into the fabric of the novel. If Malgudi and Yoknapatawa are etched in the reader’s mind, so is Ayememem which is probably today more globally recognizable than Kashmir. Kerala comes alive not merely in topographical details but breathes through the pages in the names, the endearing terms and dress of the characters. Pappachi, Mammachi, Mon, Mol, Chachen, Chetan, Kochamma, help root the novel in Malayalee society. Kerala is present not merely in the physical, external world but is an integral part of the novel in many more ways. The matriarchal family system is wrongly associated with the whole of Kerala though it is prevalent only among the Nair community and the erstwhile royal family of Travancore. Roy excels in evoking the local flavour and integrating it into the fabric of the novel” (179).⁵

The critical perception of the novel in the light of Feminist centered consciousness brings in the issue of contested and explored Independence of women. Apart from the other thematic concerns like emphasizing the failure of Communism in Kerala and the atrocities perpetrated on ‘Untouchables’ in the Communist ruled Kerala, *The God of Small Things* conveys the Independence of women as a more significant theme to be noticed. The central character Ammu defies the laws of the society to realize her own world of freedom. Being the victim of gender discrimination in her family right from her childhood, she realizes that the social institutions hold an inevitable sway over the social maturation of women. Ammu’s realization leads to serious silent resilience in every aspect of her life. In her attempts of exploring the realms of freedom she provides a space for Velutha, an untouchable, to experience equality. She understands that the social positions of Women in India and untouchables are almost similar. The pain and agony experienced in discrimination and the victimized positions bring Ammu and Velutha together. The status of freedom that the society has failed to provide to Velutha is facilitated by Ammu, who frames her own love laws. The attempts of Ammu in bringing Velutha to the world of love is understood to have disturbed the social hierarchical structure in the society. Dismantling of the social structure by

woman receives the wrath of every institution in the society. 'The love laws' made by her to create a world of her freedom finally devour her life. But the attempts of Ammu signify and challenge the basic fallacies in the very formation of the society. The contestation and exploration of Ammu to create a world of her freedom is beyond the perception of classified notions of Feminism. One needs to go for an alternative critical concepts like 'Fourth World Feminism' that stands for the inclusion of women and untouchables of India to create the world of freedom.

The observation of Elaine Showalter brings authenticity to this perception. She observes: "The voice we hear in *God of Small Things* is soft, heavy continuous a genuine accent of woman hood, one of the chorus of secret voices speaking out of our bones, dreadful and irritating but instantly recognizable".

It is in the light of these perceptions of Feminism the themes of the novels *Wife*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Difficult Daughters*, *Raj* and *The God of Small Things* should be analyzed. *Wife* and *Interpreter of Maladies* thematically stand for South Asian Feminism as they deal with the existential problems of immigrant women in the West. *Difficult Daughters* and *Raj* represent third world Feminism as they take us into the Pre and Postcolonial times of India. The changing social transmission of India is viewed from the Feminist perspective. *The God of Small Things* sets the tone for Fourth world Feminism as it has emphasized the theme of Dalit emancipation.

Feminist criticism was the direct product of the women's movement of 1916. Feminism has become a vital aspect in literature in contemporary society and the female perspective, expressed through women's writing of all kinds is considered to be more than a valuable connective to an all-male view of the universe. In exploring the question what is it to be woman lies the history of mankind: "History of mankind is the history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman having indirect object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her". (Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions of The First Women's Rights Convention In America, Seneca Falls, 1848). It is perceived that the very subjection of women is consolidated by religion. The Holy Bible holds such observations and perceptions: "Wives submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord (The Holy Bible. Ephesians, 5: 22).⁶

This concept of women consolidated by Christianity affected their status for centuries. Gradually women lost the right to control their lives and as a result they were deprived not only of human rights but of humanity. Literacy spread rapidly and women began to utilize the power of the pen. Betty Friedan, the mother of modern Feminism with the publication of *Feminine Mystique* (1963) initiated this new change.⁷The new women's movement expanded into a commanding

political force: “Women are an oppressed class. . . . We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, our prescribed behavior is enforced with threads of physical violence”. (Lisa Turtle. Encyclopaedia of Feminism, (42)).⁸

Feminist writings were of crucial interest to the post-colonial discourse for two major reasons. First, both patriarchy and imperialism could be seen to exert different forms of domination over those subordinate to them. Because of this, it was important for the experiences of women under the patriarchal influence to come out to the forefront and expose the undue cruelty beheld on them by men. It was necessary for the women to oppose this male dominance over them. We observe that women continued to define the borders of the community, class and race. They tried to exert feminism in their works. Though the writers tried to depict the women as strong and focused in their vision to succeed in lives, they were, however, able to succeed in their lives only in the space allotted to them by the men. The protagonists in most of the contemporary novels belonged to the third world of feminism. These protagonists were exposed to the changed socio-cultural situation. Traveling in contemporary situation has facilitated the third world women for empowerment.

The women, once they became mobile, automatically tended to make themselves dynamic and in turn became agents responsible for social change. ‘Traveling’ in its general understanding is the action executed by men. It is related to the acquirement of knowledge. Travelers are always men. Their journeys have always changed the discourse of the world. The literature evolved out of the travelers is also patriarchal in perception. The accounts of the travelers to India like Al Beruni, Fa hien, Huien Tsang etc have offered a very different version of Indian history which stood in negation with the official version of history. The history and literature created by the travelers though had its specific distinction, is not devoid of male perspective. To subvert this perception, third world women writers make their women protagonists to travel across the globe. Every journey initiates a new vision and creates a ‘new self’ in the lives of the women characters presented by third world women writers. It is this perception that almost decides the theme in *Wife* and *The God of Small Things* to the greater extent and in other novels to the lesser extent. The traveling enables women to overcome the obstacles like gender, class, race, caste etc.

Arundhati Roy in her novel has a sensitive understanding of her female characters. They are not emancipated, though they are affluent and belong to upper middle class. However, at the same time they cannot be called passive. 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 a transgressional behavior. They make efforts to interrogate the structures of caste, clan and gender in an implicit as well as an explicit manner. Despite many international agreements affirming their human rights, women are still much more likely than men to be poor and illiterate.

They usually have less access than men to medical care, property ownership, credit, training and employment. They are far less likely than men to be politically active and far more likely to be victims of domestic violence. Women empowerment is also an essential element in national development. Since women constitute half of the population there can be no development unless the needs and interests of women are fully taken into account. As a formal agency, the government of India wanted to improve the living conditions of women at different times. Here education played an important role for women empowerment. The activities of the missionary societies in the field of women's education have brought about tremendous changes in the society.

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