

The Trauma of Being a Woman: Oppression of Women in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

All around the world violence against women occurs daily. In India also women are subjected to oppression and humiliation in several ways day by day. Indian women are mainly oppressed because the country is built around a patriarchal mind set. Patriarchy is a social system in which each and everything in the family is controlled and decided by the males. They have the roles of political leadership, moral authority and property ownership. The patriarchal idea is that a woman's only duty is to serve her father, brothers and her husband. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a novel which is set in a patriarchal society. Breaking laws, forbidden relationships, the changing social order, oppression of women etc. are its main themes. This novel shows how differently men and women are treated according to the unwritten social norms. Women who stand against men and society are considered as the other and they will be punished accordingly. The present article analyses how Roy portrays an unpleasantly difficult situation of Indian women against the setting of Ayemenam, a southern Indian state of Kerala where the chain of relationships are very complex which traps the female characters subjecting them to repeated suppression.

Keywords- Oppression, Gender, Patriarchy, Societal Norms

India is a vast sub-continent in Asia, with a population of over a billion people. More than the four fifths of the population is Hindu, more than one tenth is Muslim, and the remainder includes Christians, Sikhs and the other people in different religions. It has a democratic system of government and it is one of the developing countries in the world. India has achieved a lot of progress in social, political and in economic fields. But it is very shame to hear that women in India are still oppressed by some of the unfair social rules that prevalent

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in our societies. *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* states the status of a man in the society as, “Man is the positive, the norm, the universal; while woman is the negative, a deviation, a distortion” (Code 374).

The life of women under the system of patriarchy has been described by some authors in their literary works. Arundhati Roy is one among them. *The God of Small Things* is semi-autobiographical and a major part of it captures Roy’s childhood experiences in Ayemenam. The novel was awarded with the 1997 Man Booker Prize. Roy takes us to feel the plight, fears, contradictions and ambitions of some middle class women characters through the novel *The God of Small Things*. Tapan Kumar Ghosh says in “Tomorrow Will Never Die: Arundhati Roy’s Tryst with History in *The God of Small Things*” that Roy’s purpose is “to write about an unfair, male-dominated society that treats women and low-caste people very badly” (184) and “her focus is on the small, individual lives of men and women who, without any heroic pretensions, break the long-cherished social taboos and tamper with the rules that lay down the social codes of behavior” (186).

The novel presents three generations of men and women. Baby Kochamma, Father Mulligan, Pappachi and Mammachi represent the first generation. The main character Ammu, who is the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi, Chacko, brother of Ammu and Margaret Kochamma who is the ex-wife of Chacko contributes the second generation. Rahel and Estha, the twins of Ammu belong to the third generation.

Oppression is a system that consisting of forces, barriers and limits. The novelist analyses the gender opposition through the marital and intergender relations of Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel. All these female characters are smart, talented and belong to the affluent class but they are not able to realize their capabilities.

In “Women in *The God of Small Things*,” critic N. P. Singh says that the first generation has a tendency to “defy the age-old norms of patriarchy”(65). Women of Ayemenam house do not have much freedom since men rule and decide for their lives. Mammachi’s relationship to Pappachi is male dominated because he is of the belief that a man should have authority over the woman. For him marriage is the male’s authority over female. Therefore, he considers his wife like a slave. Their relationship is filled with jealousy, hatred and it is devoid of love. Since Mammachi is a successful businesswoman and she gets more popular as time goes, Pappachi becomes jealous of her. In the meantime he starts to

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beat her. He does not want to see the good qualities in his wife. No night had passed without beating his wife. Mammachi is partially blind, but he does not like to lend her a helping hand because he considers that pickle making is not a suitable job for a high ranking ex-Government official.

Mammachi is a physically and psychologically abused wife like so many women in different societies who undergo torture and never speak out. She does not speak against the actions of her husband and remains in silence. Pappachi is not ready to encourage his wife in her jobs. There is the time when they spend a couple of times in Vienna and Mammachi takes lessons in violin, but when her teacher praises her exceptional talent before her husband, he abruptly stopped her music lessons because of the fear that his wife may surpass him.

When Chacko warns Pappachi against beating, he withdraws all communications with his wife. He finds another way of oppressing her. From that time onwards he never tried to speak with Mammachi until his death. Whenever he gets a chance, he rejects and insults Mammachi. To show his relatives that Mammachi is not caring him and to make people feel sorry for him, he starts to sew buttons in front of them that are not really missing onto his shirts. In "Man-Woman Relationship in *The God of Small Things*," critic Nirmala C. Prakash points out Pappachi's view of marriage as follows: "Wife is but a slave who can be driven out of the house at his will and whose precious possessions like piano can be as mercilessly broken..." (180). Roy adds that Mammachi accepts her situation and becomes submissive to the societal rules, "she accepted the female role model imposed on her by the society – docile, submissive, ungrudging, unprotesting" (56).

Another maltreated victim in the novel is Baby Kochamma, sister of Pappachi. When she was a young woman, she falls in love with Father Mulligan, an Irish Priest. When her dream of marrying Father Mulligan gets shattered, she receives the shock of her life. In order to win him, she converts herself to Roman Catholic faith but ultimately she is a failure and starts living in the Ayemenam house. She does not dare to challenge the traditional ideas of love and marriage prevalent in post-colonial India. Baby Kochamma does not run away to fulfil her dreams but upholds her very reactionary ideas. She hates the Hindus, does not think that a married or divorced daughter has any position in her parent's home and she is against intercommunity marriage. She conspires with the inspector and puts Velutha, an untouchable

in the prison, where he is severely beaten to death. This attitude of negativism is perhaps due to the malicious treatment meted out to her in her life.

Baby Kochamma does not overtly believe in the rights of women as well as subalterns and makes a distinction between her self-interest and those of other women. In stark contradiction to her personal subversion and transgression of patriarchy and oppressive structures, Baby Kochamma concurs in the repressive actions against Ammu. Male dominance in family matters stifled their voice even in personal matters like marriage. Thus like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma also apparently submits to the patriarchal norms without any hesitation but if closely examines we can see that she has an implicit resistance against the socio-political order in post-colonial India.

Pratibha Vermain “Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*: A Study in Feminine Sensibility and Aspects of Style,” has of the opinion that the women in the novel are always under the genuinity of the men and strictly under the shade of a patriarchal society in which she defines patriarchy as, “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (180).

Ammu, a middle class educated woman and a divorcee with two children, is the female protagonist in the novel. Even though she is educated, she is also the victim of the male dominated society. Oppression of Ammu begins by her father. He does not allow her to educate herself at college. He says that college education for a girl is an unnecessary expense. Although she would have liked to be educated, she is rejected for the reason that she is a girl. Ammu is not privileged for college education and also for marriage as dowry is a difficult preposition. Pappachi and Mammachi treated their children differently because one is a woman and other is a man. They send Chacko to Oxford for quality education. Ammu realises that they do not care for her as they do about Chacko. Sometimes she feels that she does not exist at all. A good example for this is her eighteenth birthday, “Her eighteenth birthday came and went. Unnoticed or at least unremarked upon by her parents” (Roy 38). Subsequently, she became domesticated depriving of privacy and freedom.

Stink of suffocating atmosphere of the house had long been felt by Ammu with her Pappachi’s outbursts of physical violence inflicted upon Mammachi. To escape from this prison, she runs into a marriage that ends in divorce. She marries a Bengali Hindu who is a drunkard and authoritarian figure over her. He asks Ammu whether she can stay with his

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boss, so that his job remains secure. But Ammu goes against his wishes and he starts to beat her. He thinks that he can beat his wife anyway he wants. He takes the power of a cruel husband. Even though he mistreats Ammu, she is not ready to be a victim and a sexual toy for his boss. Here Ammu stands as a sturdy woman who is not ready to be a doll in her husband's hands.

Ammu is a woman who does not think about the consequences of her actions. Even though she knows that marrying a Hindu will create chaos in her life, she goes for it anyway. And also, she knows that it is against the social norms of Kerala for a woman to divorce her husband, she breaks the rules again and divorces her husband since she can't tolerate his misbehaviour. Finding no other solutions she returns to her parents' home, to Ayemenam, unwelcomed with her dizygotic twins- Rahel and Estha. Her house turns out to be a horrid place for her. She becomes a subject of humiliation and insult by her own family members. There was only a lukewarm response even from Mammachi to the needs of Ammu and her children. In the opinion of Baby Kochamma, a married daughter has no place in her parents' home and has no place for a divorced daughter at anywhere. She takes the advantage on the inter-religious marriage of Ammu by ignoring her and her twins. She dislikes the children for the reason that they are fatherless. Frustrations of Baby Kochamma had its origin in her hopes as a novice of winning the heart of Father Mulligan had failed. Her sadistic temperament got its bloom in creating opportunities to ditch Ammu.

After getting divorce from his wife, Chacko resorted to the parental home like Ammu. But he, being a male takes the entire operations of the house. Ammu and her children have to live under his mercy for their subsistence. While divorced women are badly treated, society allows divorced men to continue the pleasures of their life. When he comes back from Oxford he takes charge of the pickle factory of Mammachi by marginalising her in terms of both clan and gender. Even though Ammu works as much as Chacko in the factory, she would not inherit anything from her parents. She works in the factory as a slave even though it is owned by her family. Being a woman she suffers all sorts of oppression even from her family members. She is cornered by the family structures and inheritance prevalent in the Indian society.

Another difference in the approach to men and women is the unfair treatment of Ammu's and Chacko's desires and how their parents fulfil their wishes. Although both the

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children of Mammachi are divorcees, she does not resist her tyrannical and manipulative son. Chacko is allowed to have sexual relationships with the beautiful women workers in the factory who are belonging to different class and castes. However, when Ammu fulfil her desires with a man from a lower caste, she gets banished because it is sinful for a woman to express her sexual feelings.

The repeated rejection of Ammu by her own relatives compels her to seek emotional refuge in Veluths- a low caste or untouchable carpenter. When her family knows about her relationship they banished her instead of supporting her. Even though Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are also women they don't try to understand the sexual feelings of a woman. While Mammachi allows Chacko to fulfil his sexual desires she considers that it is not good for a woman to express her feelings. So everyone turns against Ammu.

Smothered by social injustice, Ammu rebels against the very social norms of the society. She knows that it is not allowed in a society for an upper class woman to mingle with a lower caste. But she neglects all the rejections and punishments that she has to face as its consequence and breaks the rules imposed upon her. Ayemenam family punishes Ammu for her sin in order to save their pride and good reputation. Velutha is put into the jail for the false charge of rape conspired by the malicious Baby Kochamma. Roy points out that when Ammu goes to the police station to save Velutha, the officer offends her as he taps her breasts with his baton. Chacko banishes her from the home and she dies alone. The church refuses to bury Ammu as she violated the societal rules. She again undergoes cruel oppression when she is cremated in an electric crematorium where beggars, derelicts and the police custody were taken.

As a woman Ammu resists the oppressive and repressive social and political structures. She does not succeed in bringing any tangible change but she puts up a brave fight for fulfilling her dreams. Her most important act of becoming sexually involved with the untouchable Velutha cannot be taken as only a sexual transgression, it is a way of resistance aimed at bringing about change in and around her. She is the rebel who represents the defiance of the current condition of society from educated and thinking women.

Rahel is the daughter of Ammu who is deprived of conventional parental law. She is also an unwanted person in the Ayemenam family like her mother. The two children Rahel and Estha live with the stigma of mixed parentage, both in the ways of religion and ethnicity.

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She is disliked by her relatives- Baby Kochamma, their uncle Chacko and even by the maid Kochu Maria. Only her mother and her brother are there to care her. Ammu being a single mother has to play the role of a father too. Rahel also derives pleasure from the company of her brother. She feels left out by her family when Sophie Mol who is the daughter of Chacko arrives with her mother. Rahel wishes to be treated as equal to Sophie Mol, but her aunt, uncle and her grandmother tries to avoid her because she is considered as the daughter of a sinful mother. After the death of Ammu the situation becomes worse.

She has a hard time in her school and was expelled three times from the Nazareth convent and refused to be co-opted by the school. There is no one to teach or guide her moral virtues. So she does not know how to behave to others. So that she drifts from school to school. Once she is expelled from school for smoking which is not allowed for women. She is always in an urge to break the rules imposed upon women by men. Since she does not know how to behave in a society as a girl, she cannot possibly think that smoking is only meant for men. All her teachers say that she does not know how to be a girl.

Like a lost soul Rahel wanders in her life. She takes up Architecture program in Delhi without any thought or interest; there she marries a man of her own choice just as her mother had done. She divorces her husband the moment he stops to fulfil her needs. She refuses to accept the fate of Ammu and Mammachi. She does not feel much cruelty from her husband like her mother and grandmother, but she leaves him anyway. She leaves him because she believes that it is better to avoid a man with whom we feel miserable than to stay with him.

The only person with whom Rahel has compatibility, a balancing harmony is her brother Estha. Their personalities balance each other like the two halves of a circle; complementing each other. The most unfair act of Rahel is her incestuous relationship with her brother. She transgresses the traditional boundaries of a defined and social relationship. While Ammu has an illicit relationship with Velutha, Rahel involves in a sexual relationship with Estha. Both in a way transgress the social norms of the traditional Ayemenam society. Their transgression is perhaps a deliberate act to resist and to challenge the society where in, they have to survive as the victims of oppression. Rahel is a rebel in the eyes of others as she breaks the laws and lives her whole life the way she wants and does not care about the consequences like her mother. She represents the contemporary women in India.

Arundhati Roy presents not only the feelings of oppressed women but also gives a new ray of hope in women empowerment by presenting bold women characters who are trying to resist the unnatural deals and rules towards females. Even though all the women in the three generations have to go through the oppressive nature of the society, the third generation gathers the strength to fight against it. Roy has a sensitive understanding of her female characters. The novelist has successfully demonstrated the injustice inflicted upon women through the means of patriarchy, caste taboos and love laws.

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