

The Gender Predicament: Representation of the Contemporary Woman in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy burst onto the literary firmament in 1997 with her debut novel *The God of Small Things* and also won the prestigious Booker Prize the same year. A compelling tale of a pair of dizygotic twins and their mother at variance in a dystopian world that presages a deep darkness, her book is also a severe indictment of the way the world treats women. In the novel, Roy deals with issues that confront women at an everyday level: Issues like domestic violence, inheritance laws skewed heavily in favour of men, social taboos and sexual abuse. Roy has explored the overlapping and intricately braided lives of Ammu, her daughter Rahel, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and their cook Kochu Maria particularly in relation to the dominant order that dictates their familial, social and cultural histories.

Keywords: Severe indictment, domestic violence, social taboos, sexual abuse, dominant order.

1. INTRODUCTION

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.” -- Audre Lorde¹

The voice of women through the ages has been regarded with suspicion and stifled remorselessly through the imposition of stiff, hierarchical rules, either within the ambit of the family or the larger circle of community and society. The identity of Indian women in particular is defined by societal and cultural norms within the parameters of their relationship with men and all within the confines of a patriarchal family structure. Either deified as a Goddess or vilified as a ‘scarlet woman’, the Indian woman contends with preconceived notions and perceptions, constrained within the context of her affiliation with others, meant to be seen in select situations, but rarely to be heard. Arundhati Roy has espoused the cause of women in her work by her portrayal of women from all walks of life. The women in the text under discussion belong to a broad cross section of society both from the upper class and the poorest of the poor, who are marginalised and oppressed regardless, by a repressive social construct within the boundaries of home and even out of it. In this paper the precarious position of women within their societal ambit will be analysed with particular reference to the Roy’s iconic novel *The God of Small Things*.

In her novel Roy has explored the overlapping and intricately braided lives of Ammu, Rahel Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and their cook Kochu Maria. Her women protagonists reflect the mindset of several generations of an upper middle class, anglophile Syrian Christian family. But even as the invisible, yet very apparent thresholds vary according to each generation, they are nevertheless there, omnipresent and relentless. To quote Antonia Navarro-Tejerro, “Roy depicts women... as either displaced (Mammachi) and dispossessed (Ammu), or sexually exploited (the women workers)” [2].

Mammachi, systematically beaten (with brass vases) by an abusive spouse, places her implicit faith and reliance on her son Chacko, her natural successor. “The day that Chacko prevented Pappachi from beating her . . . Mammachi packed her wifely baggage and committed it to Chacko’s care. From then on he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love (*TGOST*,168) [3]”. She even catered to his “manly needs”, and “and secretly slipped them

money to keep them happy . . . in her mind a few *clarified* things. Disjuncted sex from love. Needs from Feelings” (p. 169). She also let Chacko, made invincible through the power of property which automatically devolves on him owing to his male lineage, run her profitable, pickle making enterprise into the ground with his new fangled entrepreneurial notions. “Up to the time Chacko arrived, the factory had been a small but profitable enterprise. Mammachi just ran it like a large kitchen. Chacko had it registered as a partnership and informed Mammachi that she was the Sleeping Partner. He invested in equipment (canning machines, cauldrons, cookers) and expanded the labor force” (p. 55-56). Chacko’s petty, bourgeois actions follow almost to the letter a classic shift in mode of production from home-working to factory-labor that marginalizes bourgeois women in a private sphere, while introducing the super-exploitation of subaltern groups, especially of working-class women and low caste labourers, writes Susan Comfort[4]. She adds that in the novel their identities are unhinged from their labor; they are ghostly presences who are merely background to the story, evidenced by a list of their names. “...Sumathi, Ammal, Annamma, Kanakamma, Latha, Sushila, Vijayamma, Jollykutty, Mollykutty, Lucykutty, Beena Mol (girls with bus names)” (*TGOST*, 172). Further as if to stress their invisibility, the very sentences describing their labor are subject less passive-tense constructions: “Chopping knives were put down . . . Pickled hands were washed and wiped on cobalt-blue aprons” (p.172). A self-proclaimed communist, Chacko sees no irony in the fact that he can summon them to his room and force his sexual attentions on them on the pretext of lecturing them on their rights. “An Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality—a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood” (*TGOST*, 65).

Mammachi also obviously discriminates between Ammu and Chacko and while she caters to Chacko’s needs without reserve, Ammu’s sexual encounter with Velutha leaves her reeling in mindless rage. Roy portrays the double standards women conform to, as they succumb and subscribe to and even perpetuate the patriarchal social structure they encounter throughout their entire lives; a pernicious system of which they are victims themselves.

Belonging to the same generation is Baby Kochamma, Mammachi’s sister-in-law, who sublimates her sexuality and her ‘tendresse’ for Irish, catholic priest Father Mulligan in pious, righteous, renunciation, and ends up as a manipulative, vinegary spinster who along with her equally astringent minion, Kochu Maria embodies all that is restrictive and repressive in the world of women. A world where women repress other women, and “the tyranny of history has choked the channels of charitable exchange” [5]. She colludes with the dominant culture to conspire against Ammu and her defenceless children, waging a war of attrition against them. Having “. . . managed to persuade herself over the years that her unconsummated love for Father Mulligan had been entirely due to *her* restraint and *her* determination to do the right thing” (p.45), she grudges her niece her consummated ‘love marriage’, and the twins each small moment of happiness and indeed their very presence in the family home. “She subscribed whole heartedly to the commonly held view that 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” (p.45). She therefore insidiously fans the flames of Chacko’s rage against Ammu and her twins and succeeds in having them banished from Aymenem House. She exemplifies the women who having “. . . unconsciously and unquestioningly imbibed and internalized the values of patriarchy, tend to derogate the members of their sex and collude in their subordination” [6].

And then there is Ammu, returned-home, unwelcomed divorcee, mother of two, precarious, ‘unmixable mix’ of the ‘infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber’ (p. 44). Within her “. . . she carried the cold knowledge that for her, life had been lived. She had had one chance.” (p. 38) For her there could be no more chances. “And no more dreams” (p.42). For her the world was bound by a remorseless margin of “wrinkled youth and pickled futures” (p.224). “And in the background, the constant, high, whining mewl of local disapproval” (p.43).

She harbours no illusions. “As a child, she 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” (p. 180).

A childhood replete with calculated cruelty (floggings with ivory-handled riding crops), her subsequent failed marriage to a full blown alcoholic, her twin “doomed waifs”, her lack of “Locusts Stand I” and the constant discrimination (‘a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl’) she has encountered equip her with an inexplicable and prickly sense of injustice and a reckless streak that eventually leads to her doom. She struggles throughout the novel to preserve her fragile

independence, but “Ammu’s stifled longing and brooding despair find an outlet in a tempestuous encounter with Velutha” [7]. This is actually an act of resistance against Aymenem’s caste-ridden social strictures, but ends in disaster.

The great, mouldering Aymenem house is also used by Roy as an analogous symbol of confinement, a living presence which seeks to restrict Ammu’s quest for fulfilment. A decaying, yet impregnable prison with locked doors, particularly to the “room where she lost her Locusts Stand I” (p.182). Where, she is locked by her mother and aunt when her affair with Velutha is discovered. “Ammu was incoherent with rage and disbelief at what was happening to her-at being locked away like the family lunatic in a medieval household” (p.252). This ‘Jane Ayresque’ motif of the madwoman locked up in the attic is used by Roy to symbolize the frustration and torment of renegade, non conformist women through the ages.

Ammu is also aware of the risks she takes as she embarks on her nocturnal liaison with a casteless Paravan, but “in asserting her own “biological desire for a man who inhabits a space beyond the permissible boundaries of “touchability”, it appears that Ammu attempts a subversion of caste/class rules, as well as the male tendency to dominate by being, necessarily, the initiator of the sexual act” [8].

But at the end she pays heavily for her sins. Humiliated publicly by a policeman, “. . . he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. *Tap, tap*” (p.8), she loses her home, her children, her very *raison d’etre*, in one fell swoop, before dying a solitary, desolate death from an asthmatic attack in a cheap lodge in Alleppey. A sweeper discovers her corpse. He prosaically switches off the fan. The commonplace ignominy of Ammu’s death suggests the insignificance of the lone woman who chooses the path of individual resistance and is crushed by a too entrenched and insensate system.

Ammu’s untimely death leaves its catastrophic mark on the lives of her daughter, Rahel as well. Rahel of the next generation of women, separated from her dizygotic twin weaves through life without any emotional moorings, drifting into a lacklustre marriage and out of it and through a succession of mundane jobs across America, before returning to Aymenem to pick up the threads of a life destroyed well and truly before it had begun. Her subsequent transgressive act of sexual union with her twin brother is in fact a continued act of rebellion against the overbearing social strictures that still surround them and which have left them wounded and reeling. Both in the case of Ammu and Rahel, the very circumstances of their sexual encounters where they go against the prevalent dominant order, precludes mere corporal indulgence in favour of a revolt against the construct of oppression. Rahel embodies in her rebellious self the contemporary woman, a transgressor by choice. She is pitted against patriarchy in an uncanny echo of her mother but somehow in the novel there is a sense of her being made of sterner stuff. Unapologetic about her actions, she seems to be, in spite of her catastrophic past a woman who chooses to live in today.

The ‘lesser’ female characters Kochu Maria, Margaret Kochamma and Kalyani, wife of Comrade Pillai, are also victims of patriarchy. Kochu Maria, the irascible, midget family cook, with the cruel laugh, colludes actively in oppressing Ammu and her children but it is the collusion of necessity, dictated by her precarious financial condition and her consequent dependence on the family. Marginalised and uneducated, she insists on wearing her heavy Kunnuku ear rings, that have irreversibly disfigured her ear lobes, else “. . . how would people know that despite her lowly cook’s job (seventy-five rupees a month she was a Syrian Christian, Mar Thomite?”(p.170). Systematically deprived of her hard earned earnings by her solitary male relative, a nephew, she is prickly, easily insulted, and quick to oppress in turn, a trait often evinced by subordinate groups who tyrannize others that share their predicament.

Margaret Kochamma, Chacko’s ex-wife and Sophie Mol’s mother, is the symbol of India’s post colonial past and the ‘anglophilia’ that persists, years after Independence. Her working-class background, instantly slots her as a less than desirable daughter-in-law for Mammachi, who would much rather think of her as another of her son’s ‘indiscretions’. At heart a traditional, conservative British girl, her one act of aberration, begets her, a jobless, slothful spouse she does not quite understand and soon tires of and her second marriage to steady, financially viable Joe, is an act of rectification. Her decision to visit Aymenem, another impulse, costs her dearly when she loses her only child. From a position of advantage, due to her association with the dominant white, hegemonic culture, she is suddenly reduced to a deprived other, whose meticulous preparations (“quinine, aspirin, broad spectrum antibiotics”) cannot restore to her, the child she has lost.

Kalyani, wife of Comrade Pillai, “Aymenem’s egg-breaker and professional omeletteer” merits but a few paragraphs in Roy’s evocative novel, but her presence buttresses the ‘otherness’ of gender in the light of her relationship with her contradictorily Communist, chauvinistic, spouse. “She referred to her husband as *addeham* which was the respectful form of ‘he’, whereas he called her ‘edi’ which was approximately, ‘Hey, you!’(p.270). Roy posits Kalyani as a subservient

object in a patriarchal world, as is evident when Chacko visits Comrade Pillai in his house. Pillai who has just returned, “. . . took off his shirt, rolled it into a ball and wiped his armpits with it. When he finished, Kalyani took it from him and held it as though it was a gift. A bouquet of flowers” (p. 272). What is disturbing about the relationship is her ready acquiescence to the unequal disposition and her willingness to conform to the stereotyped ideals of what an ideal wife should be.

2. CONCLUSION

Roy uses her female protagonists, whose lives inevitably overlap at some point in the book, to articulate the silence of women as a community, and her novel is an act of resistance against their subjugation at the hands of an indomitable, relentless patriarchy. The consequences of Ammu’s act of transgression with Velutha, a Paravan by caste breaks the “Love Laws” that dictate who should love who and whom and continues to shadow the lives of her children after she is long deceased. Rahel in turn violates societal edicts as a subversive act of revolt. But the other women in *The God of Small Things* subscribe to patriarchy and sometimes actively collude in the repression of others of the same sex. Roy’s novel gives voice to the oppressed woman and depicts how women across a vast swathe of the societal framework continue to face subjugation by a hegemonic dominant patriarchal order.

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