

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: A Feminist Study

C. RAMYA

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts a feminist study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Her writings are marked with revolutionary spirit. In her fiction every woman suffers in her own way. Arundhati Roy as a social reformer raises her voice against a male-dominated patriarchal Indian society.

Keywords: Marxist, communism, dehumanising, discrimination, hypocrisy, male-chauvinism.

Suzanna Arundhati Roy is one such writer whose writings reveal her compassionate concern for the underdogs. Her maiden novel *The God of Small Things* which won the Booker Prize unfurls a plethora of details regarding the upper class people's exploitation of the lower class and the problems besetting woman in a male dominated society. This maiden novel does significantly reveal the literary structure of Arundhati Roy as a social reformer for through this novel, she does beautifully expose the social and political evils of the Indian society in which the powerful and the dominant use their power rather viciously to crush the weak and the voiceless, the downtrodden and the poor, the woman and the untouchables.

The backdrop of the novel being Post-Independence Kerala does not only explore the social issues but also the hardened social attitudes, which really goes back to the deeper layers of Indian society. The story 'actually begins when the oppressive,

discriminating and dehumanising laws that determine human conduct and relationships are framed by the Indian society. The ideology located in the background is not a simple effort to concretise time and history. The rise of Marxism after the decline of British Imperialism is noteworthy as it denotes the shift of political power. Arundhati Roy ponders over certain political developments in India, such as the dawn of Independence, the formation of the Congress Government at the centre, and the spread of communism in Kerala. She has remarkably portrayed the nature of functioning of communism in her Marxist Indian State namely Kerala through the characters of comrade K.N.M. Pillai, the representative of Ayemenem's manipulative leftist politics and E.M.S. Namboodiripad. The seed of the novel *The God of Small Things* was planted in the mind of Roy in 1991. Roy received the Booker Prize 1997 for this novel. She recollects:

“.... I had just got a computer and I liked the idea of writing on it. So I just started putting down. What was going on my head. It was a very private thing. I wouldn't show what I had written to anybody”

(Qtd. in Prasad 4).

A characteristic feature of *The God of Small Things* is that it brings to life the quiet, sleepy village of Kerala, Aymanam. Here she paints the darker side of India, of Kerala's Christian society, of the small and helpless people. By taking the poetic liberty of daring Ayemenem from the real name Aymanam, she is said to have universalised “Aymanam” in the manner of R.K. Narayan's “Malgudi”. The development of the story and the characters of the novel are not done in isolation but in relation to the socio-political, cultural milieu that prevailed in Kerala during the period 1960s and 1970s. The novel does focus on one family – the Ipes. The Ayemenem family owns a pickle factory that comes into conflict with the communists. The world of real politics is projected through the presence of Pillai. The relationship between Ammu, the protagonist, and Velutha, an untouchable, is presented as a challenge to the inherited caste-system of the

Indian society and to the constructed classlessness of contemporary Marxism.

The 'God' and the 'Small Things' of the title of the novel can be interpreted in a number of ways. At the most restricted level, they may refer to Velutha and the small things of his trade and his illegal love affair. Then the small things can be the world of insects and other smaller creatures over whom man regards himself as their God. And at the highest level, it is the earth, even the whole universe, which contains nothing but 'Small Things' for the Almighty, their creator, preserver and destroyer. Khushwant Singh very frankly admits:

"Moneywise, she has surpassed everybody. "

(Qtd in Dodiya 133).

John Berger comments,

"Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one"

(Patil 123).

Whatever might be the controversy upon the great success or downright failure of Roy's work, it is true that Roy has enriched the English language by her bold innovations, breakthroughs and verbal virtuosity.

No doubt, Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an uncompromising attack on the caste-ridden, male chauvinistic section of the Indian society in which men dominate over women, the high caste over the untouchables and the over throwers over the downtrodden, with heinous selfishness, obtuse insensitivity and arrogant high-handedness. The novel exposes the caste-ridden hypocrisy and the male-chauvinistic prejudices of the traditional Indian society as seen in the microcosm of Ayemenem, a small village in Kerala. Ayemenem becomes a micro-cosmic world, a stage for the enactment of societal suppression in which women and untouchables are ruthlessly oppressed and victimised. Here in this novel, Roy

describes a society which is traditionally matrilineal. The family she focuses upon is Syrian Christian. She shows tremendous skill in portraying the oppression of characters at different levels of society. She introduces the power structure in society and shows how the more powerful victimise the less powerful. At the centre of this complex power structure, Roy does examine the oppression and victimisation of Mammachi, Ammu, Estha, Rachal and Velutha. Truly speaking, *The God of Small Things* is a realistic portrayal of the plight of the women in the society and their struggle for the identity quest in a patriarchal society. In the words of Garda Lerner, patriarchy means:

... the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male domination over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power (P 112).

This novel bristles with all the standard elements of a patriarchal world where men are considered more equal than woman. She reveals how the woman and untouchables are treated as subjugative objects in the patriarchal society. All patriarchal societies seem women as secondary humans. In *The God of Small Things*, Reverend E. John Ipe is the great grandfather of Estha and Rahal. Rev. Ipe's attitude to his wife, Aleyooty Ammachi suggests that he is a male chauvinist. The description of their portraits, hung on the wall of the Ayemenem house, suggests an element of discord. Rev. Ipe's look focuses on the road. Aleyooty looks in the same direction, but with hesitation: "with her eyes, she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart, she looked away" (P 30). Rev. Ipe sends his daughter, Baby Kochamma abroad for education because he knows that with the kind of "reputation", she had developed at a young age she would be "unlikely to find a husband". So like any shrewd Syrian Christian father, Rev. Ipe decides that "since she couldn't have a husband there was no harm in her having an education" (26). Pappachi, the son of Rev. Ipe makes a lot of

distinction between his son and daughter. He sends his son, Chacko to oxford but deems college education" an unnecessary expense for girls" (38). He illtreats his wife Mammachi who bears his beating and abuse in silence.

Being a multi-facet personality, Pappachi is the queer mixture of love and hatred, kindness and anger, selflessness and selfishness. He donates money to orphanages and leprosy clinics. He works hard on his public profile as a "sophisticated generous, moral man" (180). He starts a school for the untouchables, but its establishment does nothing to fulfil his revolutionary vision of a school where children of different castes could study together. Pappachi turns out to be a "monstrous, suspicious and bully, with a streak of vicious cunning" (P 180). He puts up a show of decency and sophistication to demonstrate his male ego but his bourgeois mentality shows up when he tyrannises his wife and child.

Every night he beats her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place" (P 47).

He rules his household like a tyrant. To him, marriage is the male's authority over the female, wife is but a slave who can be driven out of the house at his will any time. During the years of his retirement, Pappachi slowly withdraws himself from other activities and prefers to live in isolation. After his retirement, Mammachi had successfully set up a pickle factory which was made fun of by Pappachi. Instead of helping her, he considers pickle-making to be below the dignity of a retired Government officer's wife. Mammachi's flourishing business and growing popularity intensifies Pappachi's jealousy and desire for vengeance. His jealousy of his wife's talents goes to the extent of promptly putting an end to her violin lesson, as soon as her instructor tells him that she has talents. Mammachi is powerless to change things, and she cannot express her resentment. The authorial voice, frilled with irony dwells on the wife's

maintenance of decorum after Pappachi's death: "Mammachi was crying more because she was used to him than because she loved him" (50). After remaining subjugated to her husband for years, she would now remain subjugated to her son. Hence forth, Chacko would be the head of the family in the powerful patriarchal structure.

Chacko is the youngest male member of the family, with a cruel character. He exhibited his ancestor's rudeness and unconcern for women, which is clear from one incident. In their Plymouth car, on their way to Cochin, Ammu, his sister, complains that he never cares about her and her children. To that, Chacko's reply is: "Are they my responsibility?" He says that Ammu and Estha and Rachel are "milestones around his neck" (85). He saves his mother from the clutches of his father and is looked upon as a saviour by her, but exploits her by transferring the ownership of the pickle factory to his name. He refers to the pickle as "my factory" in which his mother is the 'sleeping partner'. By doing so, he earns the image of a "male chauvinist peg" (P 83). Both Ammu and Chacko are in a similar position as far as their marital status is concerned. Ammu has been a victim of battering while Chacko has been discarded by his wife for his lethargic, unproductive ways. But in Ayemenem, Chacko holds the reins of control, being a male and Ammu is at his mercy for her and her children's subsistence. Both Ammu and Chacko are young and vital enough to hope for another chance at love. Ammu is tortured and tyrannised for her love affair whereas Chacko flirts with women labourers in the name of "Man's Needs". The same behaviour of Ammu is termed as illicit, untraditional and sinful. The preferential treatment shown towards Chacko's widowed ex-wife and their daughter is openly displayed, throwing Ammu and her twins into complete isolation.

Chacko's love for his fair-skinned blue-eyed daughter Sophie Mol is boundless but his feelings for his own niece and

nephew are very much within the limits of discipline and formality. Chacko has threatened, with the authority of a patriarch in his own house, "Get out of my house before I break every bone of your body" (255) and in the end, it is Chacko who orders Ammu to leave the house driving her to her untimely death.

Arundhati Roy implicitly advocates greater social reform in the rigid positioning of women. She presents a tragic vision of life. All the major characters undergo acute and insoluble psychological problems in their lives because of the loosening of traditional values of Indian society with regard to love, marriage and family life. Familial ethics remain in conflict with the emotional urges of the individual. Marriage which seals the bond of love turns out to be a social obligation. Mammachi and Baby Kachamma who belong to the older generation, have impulses and urges that defy the age-old norms of patriarchy but they are not able to make a decisive choice and have their way in a traditional society. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma represent the generation born in Pre-Independence Kerala. They willingly submit to the patriarchal norms. Though Mammachi is regularly beaten by her spouse, she does not protest against his torture. She internalises the patriarchal definition of woman as subservient to man. She accepts Pappachi's rejection passively and submissively. She as a typical entrapped female regards her husband as an inevitable oppressor. She has accepted the female role model imposed on her by the society-docile, submissive, ungrudging and unprotesting. Baby Kochamma, Mammachi's sister-in-law, who is unmarried, has faced no brutality since she is unmarried and belongs to an upper class 'reputed' family. She is the only old member of the Ayemenem House. She does not have the impulses of a rebel but eventually she too submits to the age-old norms of love and marriage. This is the reason why she has to live the life of a spinster even though she secretly does on Father Mulligan. Ammu represents the succeeding generation that defines the dominant sexual norms of the time.

Arundathi Roy takes up the causes of the oppressed women. Though Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are sufferers in the drama of life, it is Ammu who suffers worst. It is through her that Roy raises her banner of revolt against a male-dominated, patriarchal society. As a child, Ammu is almost neglected by her parents, who are actually ill-mated pair. Lack of love between Pappachi and Mammachi cuts deep into the psyche of the children. Bitter childhood experiences have created rough edges of a rebel in Ammu. Ammu who has no "Locusts Stand I" (57) does represent the status and predicament of women in the stagnant Indian society. Ammu has an early experience of male-chauvinist brutality through her own father. Pappachi, who considered the education of women as "unnecessary expense" did not allow her to continue her studies. She finished her school education the year her father had retired from his job at Delhi and settled at Ayemenem. The only escape for Ammu, from the oppressive atmosphere was through marriage. Being denied a college education, marriage for her also becomes a difficult proposition as dowry could not be afforded. So she had to wait at home and become domesticated.

During her sojourn in Calcutta, Ammu at someone's wedding reception, met 'her future husband' who was an assistant manager of a tea estate in Assam. Ammu was in a hurry to marry him because she knew that in Ayemenem, people were opposed to her wishes and so something was better than nothing. Her future husband "proposed to Ammu five days after they first met She thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem" (39). But after the marriage, Ammu discovers that she was jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Her husband proves to be an alcoholic who goes to the extent of asking her to satisfy the carnal desire of Mr. Holick, his boss, so that this job could be saved. This extreme humiliation creates a sense of hatred in the heart of Ammu for her husband who,

“grew uncomfortable and then infuriated by her silence. Suddenly he lunged at her, grabbed her hair, punched her and then passed out from that effort” (42)

Ammu also hits back as hard as she can. But when his bouts of violence begin to include the children, Ammu has no alternative but to break off and come back with her twins. She leaves her husband and returns to Ayemenem “unwelcomed” by her parents. Ammu comes to know of her real status in her father’s home. She subscribes whole-heartedly to the common held view that a married daughter has 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 quaveringly silent on the subject (45-46)

Ammu’s lonely life is seen as the life of futility and the daily humiliation of a divorced women in Indian society. Though Ammu is the daughter of the house, she and her children have always been treated with scorn because she is a divorcee, which is an accursed state for a woman to be in a patriarchal society. Ammu is repeatedly humiliated because of her failed marriage. Ammu loved Velutha as her childhood companion. She has a fiery spirit of protest which she herself wants to articulate. She realises that she has no space of her own, no identity. So, she takes a lover who brings back to her whatever she has thought she has lost. Ammu and Velutha turn deep lovers of each other, throwing away all scruples of caste, creed and community. Unable to restrain herself, Ammu demolishes all the barriers and walks with the company of the despised Paravan. She does not care for the consequences for nothing could be worse than what she has already faced. Babu Kochamma and Mammachi women of the older generation, didn’t even try to speak out. Ammu,

young and hopeful, cries out but the result is pitiful. She becomes asthmatic, her voice rasping and horse. When she dies, she is alone in a grimy, dingy room of Bharat lodge in Allepey where she has gone for a job interview. As she is a divorcee and has an affair with the low caste Velutha, Chacko has wrapped her in a dirty bed sheet and her body laid out on a stretcher and cremated in an electric crematorium. Most of the critics who have responded positively to Roy's novel praise its "verbal wizardry", its "verbal exuberance", its capacity to evoke a world whose reality appears newly minted whereas the critics who have responded negatively, to Roy's novel accuse her of her 'over-writing', 'her utilisation of stylistic inversions and her deviation from the standard language. Commenting on her word play, Kamala Das remarks:

"....Arundhati Roy uses English as plaything. She can spit at correct English. She is Cinderella and fame is her prince" (39).

This novel *The God of Small Things* makes a scathing attack on the patriarchal notions of Kerala's caste ridden Society. This caste-oriented rigidly sometimes plays havoc with the innumerable innocent lives. The weaker sections of the Indian society – The Paravans, the Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and the dalits inescapably suffer a good deal in the process of caste stratifications. Roy vividly portrays the acute suffering and deep frustration of these sections through Kelan, Vellya Paapen and Velutha who are the representatives of the untouchables. Roy's protest stems from her rage at the slave-like Status of women and the untouchables in the caste-ridden, male-chauvinistic Indian society.

WORKS CITED

Dodiya, Jaydipsih and Indravadan Purohit, "Autobiographical Elements in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Indian Writing in English*. Ed. Manmohan K. Bhatnagar. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1999.

- Khot, Mohini. "The Feminist voice in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*". *Indian Feminism*. Ed. Jasbir Jain and Avadesh Kumar Singh. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2001.
- Khushu-Lahiri, Rajyashree. "Broken Laws, Shattered Lives: A Study of The *God of Small Things*. *Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary*. (ed.). R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999.
- Prasad, A.N. *A Critical Evaluation: Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2003.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: India Inc., 1997.
- Singh, Pramod Kumar. "Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: A Mirror of Contemporary Indian Psyche." *Indian Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2001. pp.85-86.