
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS- A READING FROM THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Arundhati Roy, born on November 24, 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya, India is one of the most exceptional modern English women writers. She gained massive popularity with her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* which she started writing in 1992 and completed in 1996. The book won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 1997 making her the first Indian woman writer to win this award.

The story of the novel revolves around the childhood experiences of two fraternal twins, named Esthappen and Rahel, born to a woman named Ammu who belongs to an upper class family. The novel is a well-knit amalgamation of conflicting ideologies of different classes, cultures, genders, races and castes of the society. The writer has fully exploited the devices of wit, rhetoric, humour and satire in the novel through the imagination of the two twins, Rahel and Esthappen:

In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins physically separate, but with joint identities. (Roy 2)

The twins represent binary differences in terms of sex as Rahel is female while Esthappen is male but being born out of the same womb to the same mother, they share the mutual feelings of love towards each other.

One of the most underlying themes of the novel is gender discrimination that the novelist highlights through the analysis of the inter-gender relations of the female protagonists- Ammu, Mammachi and Rahel. These characters represent three generations, each of them being born and raised under different circumstances. Mammachi is the eldest one, then Ammu the elder one and Rahel, the youngest one.

Even though, these female characters belong to the upper class but they are deficient in possession of courage to openly rebel against the social order of patriarchy and are often seen oscillating between conventional rules and contemporary outlooks: "Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcome to her parents in Ayemenem." (Roy 42)

Ammu, the mother of Rahel and Esthappen tries to step over the boundary of her marriage by leaving her husband. However, as she decides to come to her maternal place, she is unwelcomed because according to the Hindi tradition, after marriage the bride belongs to the house of the groom thus implying a break up from her maternal home.

In defining female culture, historians distinguish between the roles, activities, tastes, and behaviors prescribed and considered appropriate for women and those activities, behaviors, and functions actually generated out of women's lives.

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The role of a woman has always been built and portrayed as revolving around the household, her husband, her children and other family members. The novelist emphasizes this issue by showing the male characters in a powerful light. It is evident from the story that the male characters typically have more power as compared to the female characters.

Though Ammu did as much work in the factory as Chacko, whenever he was dealing with food inspectors or sanitary engineers, he always referred to it as my factory, my pineapples, my pickles. Legally, this was the case because Ammu, as a daughter, had no claim to the property. Chacko told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no Locusts Stand I. 'Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinist society,' Ammu

said. Chacko said, 'What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine.' (Roy 57)

Even though, the female characters appear intelligent and productive, yet they are never fully equipped with freedom to become independent, emotionally as well as financially, because of the authoritarian societal construction. Ammu and Chacko belonged to the same family but the rights and independence they received varied contrastingly in terms of their gender roles in the household.

The women in *The God of Small Things* are mostly discriminated against men in the context of matrimonial and family issues. Ammu got married with all rituals and customs of an Indian wedding but her husband turned out to be a drunkard who even urged her to sleep with his boss, Mr. Hollick, after which Ammu left him and returned with the twins, Estha and Rahel, to Ayemenem. Then she got into a secret love affair with Velutha, a carpenter who belonged to the low caste and consequently, she was banished from her home. Her relationship with Velutha is particularly significant in that their affair signifies rebel on the part of Ammu, who not only gets into an extra-marital affair with a man but with the one who is an untouchable, an outcast in the society. Here, Ammu not only defies the laws of marriage but also of the caste system as practiced in the Indian Hindu society.

The ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments. The female psyche can be studied as the product or construction of cultural forces.

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Ammu loves her children as any mother would do. However, the feminist in Ammu does not permit her to remain satisfied with the pains and pleasures of motherhood while being deprived of the bliss of married life. Therefore, she chooses to retrieve her sexuality by deciding to "love by night the man her children loved by day." (Roy 77)

Spivak suggests,

[. . .]the subaltern cannot have a history of his/her own and cannot have a voice and that if the subaltern is a female, she cannot be heard at all because she exists in

absolute silence: It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (28)

In this regard, the untouchables through the character of Velutha, can be viewed as a subaltern subjects as someone, whose voice and identity is blurred in the social class and caste system. The writer describes Velutha, in the novel as "*The God of Small Things*":

Who was he, the one-armed man? Who *could* he have been? The God of Loss? The God of Small Things? The God of Goose Bumps and Sudden Smiles? Of sour metal smells—like steel bus-rails and the smell of the bus conductor's hands from holding them?" (217)

The novelist wishes to attract attention to the supremacy of patriarchal authority, but her endeavors fail to give a voice to the subaltern subjects in this novel as the rebels are punished severely for their so called sins. Both the women and the community of untouchables stand equally helpless on the mutual pedestal of discrimination in society and are suppressed and oppressed as subaltern while being treated as second sex.

The family of Mammachi; mother of Ammu and Chacko, are Syrian Christians but because they live in India, they are much predisposed by practices of Hinduism like untouchability. Mammachi's character is shown as a puppet dancing in the hands of the men in her life, her brutal husband who is called Pappachi, and her fortunate -Oxford educated son Chacko. She got married at an early age to Shri Benaan John Ipe, a man seventeen-years older to her who was once an Imperial Entomologist. She was a budding musician in her young age but was made to stop pursuing her passion because Pappachi didn't want her to. Pappachi would often beat Mammachi (an act of executing male dominance over the female body) with a brass flower vase. Also, he used to insult Mammachi as she was never allowed to sit in his Plymouth, until after his death. When Chacko, her son came back home after getting divorced from Margaret, he took over Mammachi's pickle factory and started referring to

the factory as “. . . my factory, my pineapples, my pickles” (57) without crediting Mammachi who had actually herself started and expanded the business. Being a docile mother and already an oppressed female in the household, Mammachi did not take a stand against the injustice being done to her. She was more inclined towards performing her duties as a mother and a wife rather than being a woman of substance. The pain of her own sufferings is shown being inflicted in the form of hatred and prejudice against other women of the household as she openly censures the illicit affair of her daughter, Ammu with Velutha, an untouchable man while acting oblivious to Chacko’s sexual exploits with low caste women. Because she herself lacks the courage as a woman to execute authority on the men in her life, she views the trait of audacity in women in the same light as that of the acts of prostitutes.

Arundhati Roy’s ‘*The God of small things*’, seems to be a journey of indiscretions as well as of the execution of desires on the part of women characters leading them to be labeled as rebels struggling to find a voice as subaltern.

Ammu and Velutha’s deaths give birth to pathos invoking the emotions of fear and pity as admonition about the penalty of revolt. The novel intricately depicts the myriad plights and the unjustifiable afflictions of women who accept torment mutely by the whip of male dominion. The writer through the characters throws light on the innate envy between a woman and another woman trapped in the web of male chauvinism. All throughout the story, Mammachi, Ammu and Rahel suffer in varied degrees because of the practice of sexism prevalent in the culture they live in. Communal makeup is tailor made so as to consecrate gender as well as social discrimination of women against men. Arundhati Roy’s writing portrays her profound apprehension for ‘small things’. Here, the small things symbolize the victims tormented by way of social, economic, political and cultural practices. By ‘small’, she makes reference to the low status of women, low caste community and children who are viewed and prejudiced as second sex. Women are shown objectified as means of sexual gratification by men. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy has endeavored to amplify the voice of the voiceless to reconstruct their social-cultural position in the society.

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