

## Transgression of ‘Love Laws’ and Honour Killing in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things

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### Abstract

Arundhati Roy’s Booker Prize winning novel, The God of Small Things reflects not only Marxist, Feminist and Dalit agendas but also the social malady of Honour killings. As the narrative unfolds, the root cause of honour killing is the transgression of ‘Love Laws.’ Ammu, Estha and Rahel transgress ‘Love Laws’ due to their disturbed childhood and sense of insecurity. Ammu and Velutha develop sexual relationship which is objected by her aunt Baby Kochamma and brother Chacko because Velutha belongs to a poor Dalit family. To protect her family honour, Baby Kochamma lodges a police complaint against Velutha and is responsible for his untimely death. Velutha’s death in police custody leads Ammu to commit suicide. Shocked at the deaths of Ammu, Velutha and Sophie, the twins Estha and Rahel have sexual encounter, not actuated by passion but by the urge to share their deepest sorrows. The present paper essays to focus on the reasons behind the transgression of ‘Love Laws’ and the pernicious social evil of honour killings.

**Keywords:** Insecurity, transgression, satisfaction, happiness, chaos.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Honour Killing is deemed to be a crime that jeopardizes the unity and harmony of the community. Violence against men/women in the name of safeguarding families’ honour has become a serious problem in India, across regions and communities. A Law graduating student from Banasthali University from Rajasthan has rightly pointed out in the readers’ blog of Times of India that the word ‘honour’ in the phrase ‘honour killing’ qualifies the

crimes (Malviya 1). It is pathetic that India does not have any specific law to deal with honour killing except for judicial precedence over it. Honour killing is not gender specific. Whoever violates social and moral codes of conduct is subjected to ruthless killing with the family’s honour placed first. Any kind of premarital, extramarital, or post-marital sexual relationship may lead to honour killings. This practice is prevalent in tribal and rural areas, but it is also

spreading rapidly to urban and metropolitan areas such as Delhi. Men frequently use honour killing as a pretext to subjugate women in patriarchal hegemony ("Honour Killing" par 1). Caste, creed, and religion have played critical roles in Indian societies since the dawn of its civilization. The defining feature of Indian society is patriarchal hegemony, which requires women to adhere to a rigid set of social codes. Manisha Gupte's article, "The Concept of Honour: Caste Ideology and Patriarchy in Rural Maharashtra," succinctly observes the manifestations of patriarchal and caste honour beyond the moment of romantic or sexual partner selection (72). In Indian society, virginity and sexual purity are prioritised for women. At the same time extramarital relationships and pregnancy before marriage are viewed seriously. Honour killing also occurs when a woman refuses to accept an arranged marriage or seeks divorce. Honour-related murders occur when a male or female family member assassinates a girl or woman for an actual or perceived sexual or behavioural transgression, such as adultery, sexual intercourse, pregnancy outside marriage – or even for being raped (Khafagy). The United Nations Population Fund estimates that approximately 5000 women are murdered each year in the name of honour. The majority of cases originate in the Middle East and South Asia, with India and Pakistan accounting for half of all honour killings. Surprisingly, village residents in rural areas support honour killings and do not report them to the police. These assassinations frequently take the form of accidents or suicides. Murders committed in the name of 'honour' may also be used to conceal incestuous relationships (Faqir 66). It is deplorable to note that even educated people do not hesitate to choose honour killing. The murder of 13-year-old Aarushi Talwar in Noida is one such example. According to investigators and lower court judges, this is a clear case of

honour killing (Sen 1). The reason for this is Aarushi's close relationship with Hemraj, a 45-year-old Nepalese manservant in their household. Another spine-chilling case from Telangana state in 2018 involved an assault and murder of a man named Pranay in broad daylight in front of his pregnant wife, Amrutha. The underlying cause is caste discrimination. Amrutha came from a prosperous upper-caste family, whereas Pranay was a Dalit (Reddy par 2). Similarly, 22-year-old Shankar from Tamil Nadu is hacked to death on a crowded road for marrying Kausalya from higher caste. Every year, hundreds of people in India are killed for falling in love or marrying against their families' wishes. ("India Dalit Man Hacked to Death in 'Honour Killing'"). Mohammad Mazher Idriss, observes that the issue of honour-related violence (HRV) has become a sensitive subject in many South Asian and Middle Eastern countries, attracting the attention of the media, human rights organisations, and academics worldwide. (1). Honour killings are frequently depicted in fiction and films. A Girl in the River, NH10, Khap, Aakrosh, and Sairat are among the Bollywood films that took a stand against honour killing.

### **Ammu and Velutha; the victims of honour killing**

Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things is a magnificent blueprint of fiction which contemplates honour killing of Ammu and Velutha for the sole reason of transgressing the 'Love Laws.' They are victimized by the inhuman behaviour of Baby Kochamma. She harbours ill will towards Velutha due to his Dalit background and the incident of his protest in the parade of Marxist comrades. He is tortured physically and mentally in police custody after she files a kidnapping case against him with a claim of being responsible for Sophie's accidental drowning death. It is a false assertion, and the trustworthy source of her hostility

towards him is his sexual relationship with Ammu. The news of Velutha's death, shatters Ammu physically and emotionally. Within a span of four years, she develops lung cancer and breathes last all alone in a lodge. These deaths exemplify Baby Kochamma's sleight of killing them without her direct involvement.

### **Childhood trauma and its ramifications**

Ammu Ipe's childhood in Ayemenem upends because of her parental disharmony. Her father's dominance and mother's physical vulnerability define her early years. Another significant feature is the detrimental effect of gender discrimination. Ammu is denied a formal education, whereas her brother Chacko continues his studies at Oxford. Pappachi believes that "[...] a girl's college education is an unnecessary expense" (Roy 38). This despicable and uncongenial environment forces Ammu to flee her parents' clutches and marry Baba, a twenty-five-year-old Bengali man who works as an Assistant Manager in an Assam Tea home. She believes "[...] anything, anyone, would be preferable to returning to Ayemenem," (Roy 39). She later learns of his alcoholism and uncultured barbaric behaviour. He is a self-centered and hard-hearted husband who is not afraid to propose to Ammu that they share his boss's bed to protect his job. He grabs her hair, punches her, and thrashes the twins when she revolts. Marriage demonstrates Ammu's subjugation and enslavement. The age-old Indian social convention has destroyed Ammu's marriage that the wife becomes the goods, articles that a man owns (Hongekar 5). The quote by Simon de Beauvoir is apt for Ammu's life, "[...] aimless days repeated indefinitely, the life that slips gently toward death without questioning its purpose" (Beauvoir 466). Ammu divorces Baba and returns to Ayemenem with her two innocent children. According to Virginia Woolf,

women and men are inextricably linked, and thus enslaving one destroys the harmony and bliss of life. Ammu faces social rejection as a divorcee (Tickell 37). Chacko, paradoxically, is also a divorcee who benefits from his family possessions and

enjoys sexual liberation. While a divorced daughter is undesirable, a divorced son continues to be the legitimate heir to the family estate. Chacko's requirements are called "Man's Requirements" (Roy 268). Ammu develops "[...] a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has spent their entire lives being bullied by Someone Big" (Roy 181-82). The narrator portrays a rebellious wife who opposes patriarchy (Prasad 194). Ammu's life is pathetic due to her insensitive alcoholic husband's torture and abuse in her parent's home. Roy states. "She spent hours on the riverbank with her small tangerine-shaped plastic transistor. She smoked cigarettes and swam at all hours of the night" (Roy 44). Although Baby Kochamma lives as a spinster and is aware of the problem of abandoned love, she attempts to subjugate Ammu by stating, "A married daughter had no position in her parent's home." As a divorced daughter, she lacked any position whatsoever" (Roy 45). Ammu's divorced status becomes a source of embarrassment and financial strain for her parental family. She suffers silently and endures her brother Chacko and aunt Kochamma's abuses. Ammu begins wandering alone at night in search of tranquillity. She defies convention by wearing sleeveless shirts and is unafraid to smoke and swim in the Meenachal stream at night. At times, she exhibits neurotic behaviour. In this state of emotional and physical crisis she is attracted to Velutha, a Dalit of Ayemenem. She is unconcerned with 'Love Laws' and prefers to submit to him. When women are empowered to live independently, the concept of feminism takes shape (Nahal 30). She cherishes her childhood memories with Velutha as a

skilled craftsman. Moreover, it is the secret charm of opposite sex which pulls her towards the well-built physique and noble personality of Velutha. Ammu gets sexually attracted to Velutha as her eyes are settled on the edges of Velutha's muscles. Velutha's fascination in her persuades that she has finally accomplished

the joy of her essential femininity, of her maturity and growth into a fully-fledged woman, a complete woman (Swain 145). Ammu's first clandestine meeting with Velutha is triggered by a melody in her transistor. This drives her to go and search for him in the darkness of the night near the Meenachal river. "Ammu noticed that he noticed. She averted her gaze. He, too, did. History's allies return to claim them. [...] Where the Love Laws define, who deserves to be loved. And in what manner. Additionally, how much" (Roy 33). Velutha and Ammu develop an attraction for each other due to their mutually acknowledged human instincts. Readers notice a shift from the easy-going romance to the confused and insecure state of life. They meet by the river for the thirteen nights during which they share 'Small Things' such as ant bites and the small spider that lives in the History House. They connect the whims of spiders to the frailty of their fate. While they are parting each night, they promise each other a 'tomorrow?'. Ammu hails from a wealthy Syrian Christian family, whereas Velutha from the Dalit family. "Someone Small who has been bullied by Someone Big their entire lives" (Roy 181-182). Roy establishes the condition in which love is governed by societal laws to preserve patriarchal hegemony and subjugate human life. Love is difficult if it violates societal rules in the name of 'Love laws'. Bose Brinda observes, "In asserting her own 'biological' desire for a man who inhabits a space beyond the permissible limits of boundaries of 'touchability', it appears that Ammu attempts a subversion of class/caste rules, as well as the male

tendency to dominate by being necessarily the initiator of the sexual act" (64). Ammu and Velutha's brief affair generates animosity within her family and community of Ayemenem. She is described as illicit, unconventional, and sinful: locked in a room and brutally maltreated (Prasad 153). Ammu and Velutha forego class and caste distinctions to meet their physical and emotional needs. He demonstrates to her what love is and how love can bring happiness to the inward soul. When their relationship is discovered in Ammu's family, she is home arrested in a room and Velutha is banished. Exactly at this juncture Baby Kochamma holds Velutha responsible for Sophie's accidental death and lodges a complaint of murder. Policemen thrash Velutha savagely for crossing caste lines and arrest him who in turn dies under police custody. Ammu is tortured and locked up in a room. By the time Ammu reaches the police station to disclose her relationship with Velutha, she is told about Velutha's death. Unable to digest the grief of her life she eventually dies of lung cancer. Though they are not murdered publicly, the reason behind Ammu and Velutha's deaths is perceived as honour killing. Rajeshwar Mittapalli succinctly describes honour killings as, "Both Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* and Priyadarshan's Hindi film *Aakrosh* (*Cry of the Wounded*) depict Dalit protagonists as victims of honour killings, the former indirectly and the latter directly. Honour killings frequently occur in these two works of art for the following reasons: [...] upper-caste families perceive a direct threat to their honour when their daughters fall in love with Dalit young men" (84). Ammu's bitter childhood and disturbed marital life drive her to violate the 'Love Laws' and develop a sexual relationship with Velutha for emotional and physical fulfilment. Veena Meetoo and Heidi Safia Mirza rightly pointed out that, "What distinguishes so-called 'honour killings' is that not only the husband or partner, but also the community and other

family members such as mothers, brothers, uncles, and cousins may commit the act" (44).

## 2. CONCLUSION

It is not only Ammu and Velutha but also Rahel and Estha transgress the 'Love Laws'

when they meet each other at the age of twenty-three. Their intimacy while sharing the grief of Ammu, Velutha and Sophie's deaths lead to love making. Perhaps they feel that they can communicate better through their bodies resulting in the taboo of incest. "Once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (Roy 328). There is no clue in the novel about the family members noticing their sexual encounter. Perhaps, this is the reason of their narrow escape from the horrible practice of honour killing. On the other hand, Velutha and Ammu's untimely deaths could well be perceived as Baby Kochamma's sophisticated prudent approach to honour killing. Baby Kochamma's failed love with Father Mulligan and her unmarriageable status are the reasons behind her tyranny. This wounded love compels her to take sadistic pleasures in mocking Rahel and Estha, torturing Ammu, and harbouring hatred for Velutha. Unwilling to compromise on Ammu and Velutha's relationship, she plots their separation and becomes responsible for their miserable deaths. Their miserable deaths are emblematic of honour killings.

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