

Delineating the Contours of the Marginalized Women Characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

The *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy is a critique of the contemporary social space and how the characters are positioned within it. The novelist sketches her characters in a manner that examines them, especially the female ones in great detail. The novel is a study of the marginalisation of the characters perpetuated by social, political and economic factors. The paper attempts to look at the portrayal of the female characters and how they are positioned within the society. The paper also aims to explore the psyche of the women characters that, in turn, throws light on the inherent patriarchy of the society depicted in the novel. Arundhati Roy, being a staunch feminist, exposes the hypocrisy practised by the men folks. The novel is a study of the relationship dynamics that undergo upheavals at regular intervals because of the shifting trajectories of socio-cultural factors and power politics practised within the space of family. The paper aims to record the perceptions of the women characters and how they become victims of a patriarchal society. It is also to be noted how women respond to the patriarchy in different ways. The various responses offer an insight into the dynamics of the social space that is affected by socio-cultural and politico-economic parameters. The findings of the paper indicate how gender politics affect the social space and determine the positioning of women over the ages. The power politics within the space of family relationships is a microcosmic representation of the larger macro social space that is dominated by vested interests and agencies of repression. Overall, the paper analyses the 'small' voices that try to get themselves heard amidst the ever evolving social and political contours.

Keywords: Family, relationships, patriarchy, marginalization, politics.

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy has always been concerned about the 'small things'. In *The God of Small Things* and other works of Arundhati Roy, it can be seen how the 'small things' in life are subjected to various forms of exploitation. The characters have been victims of the state, society and the hegemonic influences of the state. In *The God of Small Things*, we primarily witness marginalisation of the following kinds:

First, we find how the women of the Ayemenem House are subjugated to different kinds of abuse, physical, emotional and

psychological. They are always at the mercy of the men folks. Second, the children depicted in the novel who are abused and unable to find a space for themselves. They are left at the mercy of the elements and expected to fend for themselves. Third, Dalits and the downtrodden how they are marginalised and made to suffer. They are subjected to exploitation and abuse by the state machinery and the upper caste people. Eventually, Arundhati Roy is also concerned about the environment. She raises her voice on behalf of the environment that has often become victim to the increasing greed of the people.

Marginalized Women Characters in *The God of Small Things*

The God of Small Things records the contemporary social space of Kerala. The women in the novel are members of the Syrian Christian community who are a minority. Therefore, they are subjected to every conceivable form of marginalisation. One, they are women and because of that, they are subjected to the subjugations of patriarchy. Secondly, because of their religious affiliation, they are also treated as non-entities. The deep rooted prejudice against the Syrian Christians is evident through these lines: "Chacko said that Estha and Rahel were indecently healthy. And so, was Sophie Mol. He said that it was because they didn't suffer from inbreeding like most Syrian Christians." (Roy, 1997, p. 64) The novel also records the experiences of the 3 generations of women who find mention in the novel.

There are a number of women characters in the novel. Baby Kochamma is the daughter of Reverend E. John Ipe who worked as a priest. Through these characters, Arundhati Roy exposes the hypocrisy that runs rife through the social space of Kerala. To cite an example, Baby Kochamma has all along been inclined towards religion. It might be felt that she is inclined towards religion because her father was a priest. But in reality, her attempt to appear religious is nothing but a sham. She falls in love with an Irish monk named Father Mulligan who was associated with her father Reverend Ipe. Father Mulligan understands that Baby Kochamma is sexually attracted towards him. Baby Kochamma even goes to the extent of force bathing a poor village child with a hard red soap. As Mulligan stops near the well where the child was bathed, Baby Kochamma asks him to explain passages from *The Bible*. The ploy is to seduce the priest into acts that are sexual in nature. Since Father Mulligan has to return to Madras to year, Baby Kochamma decides to convert to Roman Catholicism so that she could remain in touch with Father Mulligan. Thus, her actions are influenced by passions that have nothing to do with religion. Eventually, she decides to leave Roman Catholicism because she understood that it will be impossible for her to be near Father Mulligan. She also refuses to re-convert to

Syrian Christianity. In this context, Joanne Lipson Freed comments,

Roy's novel, too, makes clear that the seemingly personal or private forms of trauma it depicts, like the abuse or rejection that take place within a family, are shaped and informed by social structures such as class, caste, nation, and empire. For some critics, most notably Aijaz Ahmad, the novel's concern with the family, the personal, and intimate relations appears to marginalize the political as a lens through which the novel's events can be contextualized and interpreted. (Freed, 2011, p. 224)

Therefore, it can be understood that the spaces of personal, political and family often get overlapped in *The God of Small Things*.

Owing to her actions, the chances of getting married becomes impossible for Baby Kochamma. No man belonging to the Roman Catholic Church can marry a former nun and a Syrian Christian cannot marry her because Baby Kochamma is no longer a Syrian Christian. Thus, Arundhati Roy successfully presents the deep rooted prejudice that is present in the social space of Kerala. Baby Kochamma has all along tried to remain in touch with Father Mulligan. Even when the father converts to Vaishnav philosophy and settles in Rishikesh, Baby Kochamma sends him letters. Father Mulligan once sends her a photograph of himself addressing a gathering of Hindu widows. Seeing the photograph, Baby Kochamma becomes jealous. Arundhati Roy comments, she was offended by the fact that he had actually, eventually, renounced his vows, but not for her.

Through the character of Baby Kochamma, the reader understands that for a woman in contemporary Kerala, marriage is the end-all of life. Education is considered to be secondary in a woman's life. Furthermore, a young woman is not allowed or expected to choose a partner for raising a family. Baby Kochamma had to convert to Roman Catholicism in order to remain in touch with father Mulligan. Moreover, the character of Baby Kochamma is an example of deception and hypocrisy. For her, religion is just a medium to satiate her passions and ambitions. There is nothing spiritual in her actions. The narcissist in her becomes evident and she

becomes desperate to attain Father Mulligan. Although she is a rebel, much like Ammu, her character betrays deception and falsity. Through the novel, a marked transformation of character is noted in Baby Kochamma. She eventually becomes insensitive and cares for her own self. When she goes to the funeral of Sophie Mol, her grand niece, Baby Kochamma is dressed in an expensive sari. At the age of eighty three, she is concerned about her external looks and even asks her grand niece Rahel about her breasts and if they appear attractive. She is a bigot as well. When her advances are unsuccessful, she starts bearing hatred towards Hindus. She says, the Hindus "have no sense of privacy". Chacko responds by saying, "And I have heard that their babies hatch from eggs." (Roy, 1997, p. 86)

Divorce is another matter that comes under the scrutiny in the novel. Baby Kochamma harbours the view that a married daughter has no place at her parents' place. Furthermore, a divorced daughter is considered to be a taboo. Although Baby Kochamma is a woman, she willingly subscribes to the ideas that are generally a by-product of the deep-rooted patriarchy. According to her, Ammu committed a serious offence by marrying a Bengali Hindu. The subsequent divorce makes matters worse. Baby Kochamma feels jealous of Ammu because the latter could exercise her will to choose her partner unlike Baby Kochamma who could never succeed in marrying Father Mulligan. The hypocrisy of Baby Kochamma is evident in other instances as well. Chacko is permitted to continue with his sexual acts in the house but when it comes to Ammu, a strict control is imposed on her by Baby Kochamma. Chacko has his 'man's needs' which are acceptable but Ammu's relationship with Velutha is scorned and criticised by Kochamma. Baby Kochamma is instrumental in getting Velutha arrested. Velutha's arrest and his subsequent death result in the banishment of Ammu. Ammu's death at the age of thirty-one is an indirect effect of Velutha's death. Furthermore, Baby Kochamma is also responsible for the misery that Rahel and Estha have to endure. Baby Kochamma hates Rahel and Estha because they are half-Hindus and born of a love marriage that took place outside their community space. The result of this hatred is that the children are subjected to various forms of torture. They

have to speak only in English within the house. They cannot play certain games and they are frequently punished by Baby Kochamma.

Baby Kochamma's evil nature becomes evident when she asks Estha to identify Velutha as the criminal in front of the police. After Velutha is arrested, Estha feels a tremendous sense of guilt that gradually makes her speechless. Baby Kochamma's hatred for Velutha is noteworthy. She detests Velutha because of the latter's caste. Since Velutha was associated with the Communist Party, Baby Kochamma loathes Velutha even more. Her own disgust for Velutha eventually leads to the Paravan's arrest and subsequent death. Thus, it can be said that Baby Kochamma is extremely an ignoble character. Baby Kochamma dislikes Ammu because the latter had loved Velutha. It is an irony that Baby Kochamma had herself loved a priest who was outside her community. Furthermore, Father Mulligan was a foreigner. It is because of her actions that Velutha is killed, Ammu dies and the lives of Rahel and Estha are ruined. Baby Kochamma is the medium of social oppression. Arundhati Roy projects Baby Kochamma as a character as someone who is brainwashed with bigotry, casteist and fundamentalist ideals.

The God of Small Things is a novel that studies the characters in detail. Another character Mammachi is more of a victim who suffers because of patriarchy. Unlike Baby Kochamma, she gets to marry the man of her choice although hers is an arranged marriage. Yet, her marriage is an unhappy one because her husband Benaan John Ipe was unsuccessful professionally. This resulted in an aberration of his character. John Ipe began beating his wife Mammachi regularly. Although the beatings stopped after Chacko visits home, John Ipe never loves his wife and always projected her as someone who neglects the household. John Ipe's personality is dual: Outside the house, the man is gentle and sober but inside, he is a tyrant. He never hesitates to beat his wife or torture her.

Mammachi not only suffers because of her husband, she is also a victim of her jealousy. When Mammachi is appreciated by her violin teacher, her husband immediately forbids her from attending any more violin classes. Later when Mammachi opens the pickle factory, her husband refuses to cooperate

with her because he feels that it is below his dignity to participate in the lowly trade of pickle making. Thus the married life of Mammachi and John Ipe is devoid of any love or compassion. Later, her son Chacko takes over the pickle factory and completely ignores Mammachi. Mammachi too accepts her fate because she is familiar with the patriarchy that runs deep in the family. However, it is also to be noted that when it comes to her treatment of her son and daughter, there is a distinct sense of discrimination. Her sense of morality completely varies when it comes to taking care of her daughter Ammu. She is never perturbed when Chacko, her son sleeps with different women. However, she is aghast when Ammu falls in love with Velutha, a person coming from a lower caste. She even has built a separate entrance so that Chacko can bring his female friends to the house without anyone's notice. However, Ammu is punished for her affair with Velutha. She is eventually banished from Ayemenem House. Mammachi is also resentful towards Margaret, Chacko's wife. "She hated her for leaving him. But would have hated her even more had she stayed." (Roy, 1997, p. 167) It can be said that she cannot see other women happy. Therefore, Arundhati Roy suggests that the agents of patriarchy may not only be men. Some women are tacit supporters of patriarchy as well. Priya Menon rightly observes,

Mammachi's imported violin and violin stands, Pappachi's expensive suits and cufflinks, and dressing tables made in Vienna are all liberally sprinkled throughout the narrative that describes the Ipe family home. European artwork adorns the walls and Pappachi's old Plymouth purchased from an Englishman gets referenced substantially, further suggesting links to whiteness, the start of British colonialism, and the perception of whiteness as endowed with superior humanistic attributes. (Menon, 2011, p. 69)

Thus, it can be said that Pappachi's anglophile nature and his hatred for the Indian customs and rituals later on helped him develop a sense of disgust for his wife that eventually led to repression and subjugation of the female characters living in the Ayemenem House. Domination and power are inherent in the codes of culture that are present during the contemporary times. The novel is essentially a

protest against hegemony and ideological domination. Thus, we find characters like Velutha and Ammu protesting against the established social customs. Both Velutha and Ammu wanted to rise above the class subjugation that was imposed upon them because of their caste and gender respectively. It can also be said that the society depicted in *The God of Small Things* is xenophobic. Outsiders are unwelcome. Thus, a paravan is looked at with suspicion when he becomes friendly with a woman of the upper caste. Also, when Ammu returns to Ayemenem House after her divorce, she is not welcomed. Instead, it is felt that her arrival will cause disturbance within the household. Similarly, on the relationship between Velutha and Ammu, O.P. Dwivedi observes, "By her treatment of the subaltern, she raises a moot question about their pitiable position in Indian society, but fails in her effort to give them their voice. Nevertheless, she urges them to shatter all conventions of the traditional society in order to fetch an identity for themselves." (Dwivedi, 2010, p. 393) Undoubtedly, *The God of Small Things* is a commentary on the subaltern communities of India. Furthermore, the novel is a commentary on another kind of subjugation. It is seen that characters like Chacko and Pappachi who are well versed in Western education are given a position of power and prestige who unleash different forms of repression on the local population. Pappachi and Chacko are the ones who dictate the terms of the society and they are the architects of the hegemonic codes of conduct. On the other hand, a character like Vellya Paapen works in menial positions. He is conditioned to take orders and never raise voice. The women in the household too are expected to stay within the house and do household chores. Thus, a colonial form of subjugation is also present in the novel. This subjugation takes place through characters who are educated in the West.

Some critics suggest that her perversion towards the other women of the house may have cropped up because she herself had suffered much at the hands of her husband. Nevertheless, her attitude towards the other women of the house is extremely discriminatory and wrongful. Her treatment of Velutha when the affair between Ammu and Velutha is unearthed reflects her deep-rooted prejudice towards people of lower caste. It is

evident that she was instrumental in the arrest of Velutha and his subsequent death.

The next character that deserves discussion is the character of Ammu. Ammu is a woman of the new generation and her beliefs are very different from the ones held by Mammachi and her contemporaries. Right from her younger days, Ammu has been a victim of male chauvinism. Her brother was sent to the UK for higher studies but when it came to her, her father felt that it was an unnecessary expense to educate a girl. Thus, her future meant only marriage and nothing else. However, Ammu betrayed a lot of independence and free spirit. Arundhati Roy has criticised the prevalent dowry system as well through her portrayal of her characters. Ammu doesn't receive many marriage proposals because her father was unable to pay dowry. Eventually, Ammu marries a Bengali Hindu when she visits her distant aunt in Calcutta. Ammu's decision to marry a Bengali Hindu stems from the fact that she is reluctant to return to Ayemenem House. Her independence is proven by her decision to marry someone from a different community. Of course, inter-community marriages are a taboo subject in Ayemenem House. Yet, Ammu decides to cross the line and marry someone of her own choice. Priya Joseph comments, "The novel is a comment on the society not merely influenced by the imposition of colonialism in a not long ago past and a newly acquired independence, but by survivals of feudal and caste laws and the essential inequality of opportunities for development and progress." (Joseph, 2014, p. 123) In *The God of Small Things*, we find the existence of the age old patriarchy that has continued for ages. Characters like Ammu become victims of this patriarchy.

Unfortunately, her husband turns out to be alcoholic. Not only that, Ammu's husband decides to send his wife to his boss' house so that the former can have certain professional gains. Ammu learns of this and later, she is threatened with violence, she beats her husband with the heaviest book in the book shelf. Unlike her mother who had accepted all the tortures of her husband meekly, Ammu decides to strike back when she feels threatened. Later, Ammu and her husband are divorced and she is forced to return to Ayemenem House with her two

kids. She is not at all welcomed and is forced to live a life of negligence. However, Ammu is never cowed down by her circumstances. She never minces her words when it comes to forming an opinion about her brother. She calls a spade a spade and so, is disliked by the other members of her family. She also exposes the hypocrisy that Chacko shows in the garb of a Marxist worker.

Ammu is a rebel. She refuses to carry the surname of her husband and so, Rahel and Estha do not have surnames in the novel. She feels that choosing between her husband's name and her father's name does not "give a woman much of a choice" (Roy, 1997, p. 36) Through these descriptions of Ammu's life, Arundhati Roy shows how the society is still influenced by patriarchy and how it has become the norm.

The rebel in Ammu ensures that she remain unsatisfied by her states of motherhood and later, a divorced life. She is extremely conscious of her physical beauty. She spends her time in looking at her body and worry about her passing youth. She goes for midnight swims, smokes cigarettes and spends hours on the river bank listening to a transistor. Finally, with the arrival of Velutha, Ammu decides to "love by night the man her children loved by day" (Roy, 1997, p. 44). This secret love affair continues for almost a fortnight before Velutha's father reports it to Mammachi. Therefore, *The God of Small Things* brings to the fore the union of two rebels. The love between Velutha and Ammu is never an illicit relationship between a divorcee and a Dalit. Rather, their union exposes the hypocritical laws of the society.

Both Ammu and Velutha admired each other. Their love was based on mutual respect as well as physical attraction.

She wondered at how his body had changed – so quietly, from a flat muscled boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body. Polished with a high-wax body polish. He had high cheekbones and a white, sudden smile. His smile was the only piece of baggage he had carried with him from boyhood to manhood. (Roy, 1997, p. 174-175)

Velutha too admired Ammu. He discovered that Ammu was physically attractive and beautiful.

He saw that Rahel's mother was a woman. That he had deep dimples when she smiled and that they stayed on long after her smile left her eyes. He saw that her brown arms were round and firm and perfect. That her shoulders shone, but her eyes were somewhere else. (176)

This mutual love affair is soon exposed by Velutha's father who complains to Mammachi about his son's deeds. Baby Kochamma takes this opportunity to settle scores with Velutha. She goes to the police station and files a complaint. Even Mammachi abuses Velutha. When Velutha goes to Comrade Pillai to seek help, the latter refuses to help by saying that the party cannot help someone's personal matter. At the Kottayam Police Station, Comrade Pillai does not try to help Velutha. This amply proves the hypocrisy of the Marxists.

The relationship between Velutha and Ammu triggers a deep sense of hatred in Mammachi and Baby Kochamma. Velutha is implicated in a false case of attempted rape and kidnap and murder of Sophie Mol. Velutha is subsequently arrested and later dies in police custody. The hypocrisy is further exposed when the police inspector dismisses Ammu's pleas. He, instead, stares at Ammu's breasts and reveals his own moral depravity. On the other hand, Ammu's moral courage is also revealed because she has the courage to go to the police station and attempt to free Velutha. The hypocrisy of the other members of the Ayemenem House is further exposed when Chacko asks Ammu to leave. Subsequently, Ammu is separated from her children since Estha is returned to his father and Rahel is allowed to live at Ayemenem. However, Ammu cannot visit Rahel frequently. Ammu later dies an ignominious death at Bharat Lodge in Alleppey where she had gone to attend a job interview.

Thus, Ammu is a character who has all along been wronged by her relatives throughout her life. She had been betrayed by her husband, wronged by her brother and mother, insulted by the police and later, rendered almost a destitute by the society around her. Thus, Ammu's character serves the purpose to highlight the social injustices that are at play.

Ammu's daughter Rahel is another character who undergoes transformation. She is neglected by her maternal uncle, grand aunt and grand-mother. Although Ammu loves her daughter, Rahel does not get the opportunity to enjoy her mother's love and affection because Ammu dies young. This, it can be said that because of the conspiracy and wickedness of Baby Kochamma and Mammachi, Rahel is deprived of a normal childhood. She gradually becomes an independent woman who is capable of taking initiatives. She never prefers to stay in the Ayemenem House and so, gets herself admitted into a college of architecture in Delhi. She is not in love with the subject but she gets herself admitted only because she wants to stay away from her relatives. During her stay at the college, she meets Larry McCaslin and marries him. Rahel very well knows that her circumstances are adverse and she hardly has any relatives who will pay a dowry to get her married to a man of her choice. So, she decides to get married "like a passenger drifts towards an occupied chair in an airport lounge with a Sitting Down sense." (Roy, 1997, p. 18) Although Larry is never abusive towards Rahel, he is never understanding towards Rahel. He fails to bring that passion in the relationship and eventually, Rahel decides to leave him. For Rahel, marriage is never an unbreakable yoke. This also proves Rahel's independent spirit. She is not hesitant when she breaks the news of her divorce to Comrade Pillai. When Comrade Pillai hears the news of her divorce, he exclaims,

"Die-vorced?" His voice rose to such a high register that it cracked on the question mark. He even pronounced the words as though it were a form of death. (Roy, 1997, p. 130)

Rahel is never perturbed by her divorce. She is, instead a strong woman. In order to sustain herself, she works as a waitress in a New York restaurant. Furthermore, she works in the night shift in a gas station. Owing to her work in the night shift, she has to regularly encounter goons and criminals. However, she maintains her calm and works there. Moreover, Rahel also takes responsibility of her brother Estha who has turned speechless because of the mishappenings in his life. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that Rahel leaves her job in the US and decides to return to India when she

learns that Estha has returned too. Rahel, like her mother experiences patriarchy and suffers because of the grave injustices meted out to her. However, she is a stronger woman than her mother who has the courage to take on life, no matter what the circumstances are.

The above discussion projects the sufferings of the three protagonists, namely, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi and Ammu. The transformation of these characters is quite distinct. Baby Kochamma who has been a victim of patriarchy and social prejudices eventually gets familiar with the ideas and agencies of oppression. She does not mind the abuses of her husband. Mammachi, on the other hand, gradually loses her human virtues. Her mind gets perverted and she slowly loses her balance of mind. She cannot stand the happiness of others. The intense feeling of jealousy that she has towards Ammu is unhealthy. Ammu, on the other hand, is perhaps the only character who undergoes a significant transformation of self. As already discussed, she is a brave woman. She represents the fearless women of her age. She aspires for equality and freedom. Through the course of the plot, Ammu can be seen in various avatars. First, she is married to an abusive Bengali husband. Then, she defies all social conventions and falls in love with a lower caste man Velutha. Later, she displays indomitable courage when she goes to the police station to demand the release of Velutha. When Ammu is thrown out of Ayemenem House, she does not lose courage. She tries looking for jobs and eventually, dies in a non-descript hotel at the age of thirty one. In fact, she desperately wanted to have a job in order to support herself. Thus, the happenings in the plot transformed Ammu significantly. Ammu can be said to be the spokesperson of Arundhati Roy. She conveys the message of the novelist and serves as the pivot in the plot. It is because of her that we come across the character of Velutha. Amitava Kumar believes,

But, perhaps connected with that is also the possibility that Roy refuses to hope for anything beyond the horror she contemplates. Those who had fought are now dead; those who are alive only happen to be survivors. The untouchable barely speaks in the narrative, and it's likely that when the story is over, all you can remember of him is his glittering smile.

The subaltern with perfect teeth. (Kumar, 1997, p. 38)

Kumar's analysis brings out the pathos that the novel contains. It is because of Ammu that the caste divisions of the society are exposed. Veena Shukla observes, "The novel is replete with instances of caste politics. The dizygotic twins are told by their grandmother Mammachi that Paravans are expected to crawl backwards with a broom." (Shukla, 2009, p. 966) The quoted sentences show how there is a deep sense of hatred for the Dalit communities. Therefore, *The God of Small Things* exposes the deep rot that is present within the caste ridden society of India. Furthermore, the character of Ammu serves to highlight the characters of Baby Kochamma, Chacko, Mammachi and others. Thus, the character of Ammu can be said to be a foil character.

Conclusion

Conclusively, *The God of Small Things* offers a peek into the lives of the women characters who are subjugated by men. However, the novelist problematizes the word subjugation and shows us how women can themselves be agents of patriarchy and play instrumental roles in the repression of women. The novel is an authentic representation of the contemporary society and proves how an egalitarian society is still a far cry in India.

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