

Confronting a Dilemma: A Gender Study on Arundati Roy's "God of Small Things"

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1. Introduction

Tagore once acknowledged that no male writer can write about the women's story the way the woman has. Arundati Roy's debut novel **The God of Small Things** explores a South Indian woman's quest for identity, which is manifested in her search for sexual freedom. This paper examines Roy's manipulation of plot and character, while focusing on an apparent dilemma, which arguably, engenders a sense of confusion. A fiction, which deliberately bares the brutal class and gender oriented violence underneath the paraphernalia of a modern South Indian bourgeois existence, ends by hinting at the decadence of the official authority, but only after eliminating any real possibility of potential transgression of that violent order. Ammu's physical and psychological deterioration, which culminates in her death, clearly violates her character of rebellion. In addition, in Rahel and Estha the reader discovers only scars of hideous grief and confusion. The adult twins' search for identity is given as futile: since they are already emotionally exiled, if not physically.

The world of the fiction (which is semi-autobiographical) is Kerala in the latter half of 1960. Roy, whose childhood was spent there would have been a witness to a turbulent political age. In an interview Roy recalls, "marxism was very strong. It was like the revolution coming next week" (Eichert, 1997). Moreover Kerala was and continues to be home for a prolific number of Christians.

In the early de-colonization and the post world war epoch, it was a society in transformation. Feudal land lordship trembled on the altar of bourgeois individualism. And the fervor of Communism arose in Kerala due to the proliferation of liberal ideals which was a thaw to communal identities. And as in many a South Asian country, Christianity in Ayemenem gained an "indigenous"

flavor. These ideological conflicts, formed an integral part in the Ayemenem society that Roy grew up in the sixties. In an interview she asserts, “When you see all the beliefs competing against the same background, you realize how they all wear each other down. To me I couldn’t think of a better location for a book on human beings”(Eichert, 1977).

The story is set in Ayemenem, in particular around the inhabitants of a house, which once wielded feudal power. The story scans twenty-six years yet everything happens virtually within thirteen nights. The climactic scene is the drowning of the twins’ English cousin, Sophie Mol. A process of seismic events is triggered by this one event. The clandestine relationship between Ammu, the mother of the twins, and Velutha, a young man from the lowest Hindu caste, is revealed and treated with horror. Velutha’s death at the hands of the Ayemenem police leaves perennial scars in the twins. Ammu is banished from the house and dies a premature death in a dingy hotel room. Of the twins, Estha the boy is returned to the divorced father while Rahel is left to herself. Both lead separate yet similar lives, marked by their unhappiness. They both rebel, yet in their individual ways. Estha, who from the beginning is shown as the more sensitive of the two, abandons speech, and withdraws into a self-inflicted cocoon. Rahel (whose history bears a striking resemblance to the author’s youth) drops out of college and marries an American. But she later returns to India. Their return to their childhood home evokes memories they strive to extinguish.

What may seem like a common theme is given a vivid novelty by a stunning narration. It is Roy’s manipulation of a common subject that warrants attention. She portrays the chaos, the annihilation of individual human agency, in a society plagued by class and gender bias. She bares the memories triggered by her childhood. She once wrote, “my fiction is an inextricable mix of experience and imagination. ... I think the kind of landscape that you grew up in lives in you” (Eichert, 1997).

1.1 Change; A Fear and A Yearning.

Ayemenem society just like the Ayemenem household is a site of conflict and consent. Change is a focal theme, in the novel. The recurring “things can change in a day” (Roy, 1997, p.162) carries an ominous note. Dissatisfaction and unhappiness mark the lives of the inhabitants of the house. Roy compares the house to a violent river, which symbolizes among many other things a continuous and turbulent flow of movement, “the

Ayemenem house still had a river sense. A rushing, fish swimming sense” (Roy, 1997, p.30). Yet virtually all the inhabitants are overcome by an overwhelming sense of despondency and monotony. Like the fish in the river, they too are unable to determine their own fates.

For the old, change poses an impending threat to the order of the socio-political mechanism. Baby Kochamma’s increasing fear for the loss of personal space climaxes to a stage of self imposed phobia; “hers too was an ancient age old fear. The fear of being dispossessed” (Roy, 1997). Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and even Papachi struggle to maintain the strict codes of patriarchal and class hierarchy. The body politic accommodates social change only if it assures status quo. The school for the untouchables. Vellye Paapan’s glass eye, Velutha’s job in the factory pay their dues by exercising reverence and a perennial display of gratitude to the Ayemenem household. The official tyranny executed against Velutha, and Chacko’s tyrannical decree “pack your things and go” (Roy, 1997, p. 226) to his only sister are sanctioned by official hegemony. That which poses to be threatening has to be excluded. Yet this reluctance to admit change becomes Ayemenem house’s own undoing. The bourgeoisie, as Marx and Engels write, cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing social relations, “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed relations, their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away. Man at last is compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind” (as quoted by Eagleton, 1996).

Roy encapsulates the precariousness of change in the first chapter. Just as the genre of the banana jelly the factory produces is uncertain, social boundaries grow in fluidity. The adult Rahel’s observation, “perhaps, Ammu, Estha, and she were the worst transgressors. but it wasn’t just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They tampered with the laws that lay down whom should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, Jam jam and jelly jelly. It was a time when uncles became fathers, mother lovers, and cousins died and had funerals, It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened” (Roy, 1997, p.31). Within the world of the fiction, the Ayemenem house’s characteristic resistance to pressures within increases its vulnerability to the pressures without. The defense mechanism employed by Chacko and Mammachi unwittingly gives space to a larger

mechanism of political opportunism, which engenders their financial and social collapse. The house Rahel and Estha return to twenty-five years later is a site of decay, anarchy and impoverishment.

2. The Ideological Conflict.

Ammu's psychological and physical yearning for Velutha, an 'untouchable', is interpreted by the body of authority as a trespassing into forbidden territory, a violation of human history. India, and emerging political power in South Asia, is struggling with its history of patriarchal and class based oppression. The 1997 film 'Mitrudand' (the punishment) depicts horrific the treatment of women, across classes. In the Northern Indian state of Bihar where poor women, who are separated from their husbands, are prosecuted by patriarchy as an ominous omen, were (are) subjected to extreme physical violence, sometimes even to death.

Yet, Roy's novel does not dwell on this history of patriarchal oppression, in as much as on the hegemonic control over female desire. She had insisted that her novel "... is not about history, but biology and transgression" (Eichert, 1997) or rather how the dominant ideology come into conflict with female sexuality. Ammu celebrates her sexuality in a forbidden realm, in a limited time span of thirteen nights, "On that shaped piece of earth, she lived" (Roy, 1997, p.337) Roy celebrates this intimacy, it is neither a mere exercise of physical gratification, nor simply a socially isolated woman's fantastic rebellion, but two individuals' mutual attraction and daring to pursue a physical intimacy in the face of enormous social hostility, "seven years of oblivion lifted off her and flew into the shadows on weighty, quaky, wings and on Ammu's road (to age and death) a small sunny meadow appeared. Beyond it an abyss" (Roy, 1997, p.337) Both the narrator and the two characters (Ammu and Velutha) are acutely aware of the impending disaster. The very precariousness of their future engenders the preciousness of the present, "slowly the terror seeped back into him. At what he had done At what he knew hw would do again. And again ... they knew there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things" (Roy, 1997, p.337). The overwhelming official power of the body politic, not only to subjugate, but also to tyrannise, thwarts their aspirations. The power structure of the world of the fiction cannot allow for a jeopardizing of hierarchies. And within the parameters of Ayemenem society, the anxiety over female sexuality becomes an assurance of bourgeois patriarchy. Ammu's escape into the alternative is also perceived as a violation of the moral order, legitimate authority has the sanction to harass her as a vaishya (prostitute).

Similarly, in Tehmina Durrani's (1994) controversial autobiography, My Feudal Lord, the author's escape from a violent and feudal husband forces her to the lowest social echelons. By now a recognized literary figure in South Asia, in her own country (Pakistan) Durrani still exists on the social periphery.

3. Marriage; The Site of Power.

Rebellion marks Ammu. For subjugation, manifested to the extreme of physical violence, is the legacy of her childhood. Denied any access to higher education, by virtue of her gender, Ammu's only escape, or hypothetical escape rather, is marriage. In the early epoch of decolonisation, when higher education was largely confined to the males in the higher echelons of society, marriage lured women with the promise of social aspirations and a false sense of adventure. This phenomenon was engendered by a vortex of socio-political dynamics. But primarily, an acute self awareness of extremely limiting opportunities and the need to enter an alternative physical space where the driving forces. Tehmina Durrani (1994) admitted her own experiences "identity and individuality were crushed. Personality failed to develop. My mind became a sanctuary for secret thoughts of escaping from this household. But for that there was no other goal in life but marriage" (p.30). Yet in an ironical play of power, this dream of emancipation demands its own cost. For marriage is not an alternative but an extension of the official hegemony.

Stephanie Garret (1992) expounds, "It is thus in the interest of all men to preserve 'patriarchy' a social arrangement whereby women are systematically oppressed by men in all areas. This would mean restricting opportunities outside the family for women, and maintaining a subordinate position for them within it". Ammu's first blunder was the intercommunal marriage to a Hindu, "she had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man" (Roy, 1997). The social mechanism would invariably interpret this as a transgression, particularly if the subject is a female. Patriarchy would not allow for this assertion of choice. Roy's own personal history as a daughter of a Hindu father and Syrian Christian mother who too were separated is a foil to Rahel and Estha's childhood. Roy recalls "we used to live in the edge of Ayemenem, forgotten by many" (Eichery,1997). For Ammu, Rahel and Estha, it is more of a metaphorical periphery. Baby kochamma's severe dislike of the children, is not a mere personal hostility, "...for she considered them doomed fatherless waifs. Worse still they were half-Hindu hybrids whom no self-respecting Hindu would ever marry ... she resented Ammu, because she saw her quarrelling with a fate that she felt she had graciously accepted..."(Roy, 1997, p.45).

Marriage, in the politics of the fiction, is shown in its raw capacity. Not as a celebration of human affection, and mutual sacrifice, but as a site of patriarchal exhaustion of power. Ammu's husband's threats to exploit Ammu's sexuality as a means of securing his personal ambitions within the ideology of the world of the fiction, strikes not as peculiar but as natural. For it moulds in with the cyclic events in which Papachi exerts his tyranny over the vulnerability of Mammachi, whose pickle factory is her only sense of achievement. Her assertion of financial power engenders his insecurity, "every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place" (Roy, 1997, p.47). And Mammachi in turn, in conspiracy with Baby Kochamma, allows space for Chacko's flirtatious affairs with the women in the factory. The sexuality of the poor women of the lower class becomes a commodity to bargain over. For Chacko's 'men's needs' acquires a legitimacy which none of the female needs could even aspire to.

Ammu's final decision to abandon an oppressive marriage leaves her more vulnerable. Ayemenen fears female articulation of independence to political anarchy and takes precautions. Even in the 1960's, after more than two decades of decolonization, the inheritance law prohibits female inheritance. This was a law against which Mary Roy, The author's mother, raged a victorious war in 1967. Yet the text chooses to be anachronistic. By deliberately excluding any significant female achievement, Roy heightens the sense of female subjugation. Chacko's garrulous assertion "what is mine, is mine what is yours is also mine" (Roy, 1997, p.57) is not the usurpation of merely her inheritance, but of Ammu's physical, sexual and psychological space. At the Ayemenem house she is included, but metaphorically excluded. Baby Kochamma's mission to exclude the children from the conversation, Chacko's flippant dismissal of Rahel and Estha "they are not my responsibility" (Roy, 1997, p.85), Mrs. Mitten's warning of Satan in their eyes are the instances of official exclusion. Even Kochu Maria (the domestic help), acquires a legitimacy to condemn Ammu's children, "these are not your beds, go and break yours" and seven year old Estha's innocent response "et tu Kochu Maria" (Roy, 1997, p. 83) is a child's unconscious interpretation of the politics of exclusion; in which the lowest in hierarchy affiliates with the official hegemony in the act of preserving patriarchy.

The other marriage in the family is a travesty of Ammu's. Chacko's marriage to Margaret fails because she refuses to conform to reality. The English woman, young and stubborn, is drawn not to him, but to the illusionary vista of 'change' he offers. The reaction is mutual. Chacko's fascination over her leads him to almost revere her. Margaret is different

from the body of femininity he has had to associate with. She is detached but loving, undemanding but giving. To Chacko, she personifies that which Mammachi is not. His sentiments for his mother are ambivalent. He hates her for her Oedipus like love, which expresses itself in the extreme of possessiveness, yet paradoxically needs it to sustain the existing political hierarchies in the Ayemenem house. Yet once beyond it, he subverts his role to an almost effeminate, subdued husband, who quietly lets go of a wife he almost reveres. She was "the one woman he ever loved" (Roy, 1997).

Reluctantly, Chacko enters the space he despises: at Ayemenem Mammachi's overwhelming adoration thwarts his aspirations. Ayemenem engulfs him like an enormous octopus. Here he flaunts the western liberal ethics like a fashion statement yet subverts them by condemning the female family members. It is the likes of him that sustain what Roy satirizes as the "cocktail revolution" (Eichert, 1997).

Chacko the entrepreneur, the feudal lover, Mammachi's son, the loving father and ex-husband, the identities amalgamate, while Ammu is the divorced mother with two children. The struggles within, between the woman and mother, triggered by her acute self-awareness of her sexuality, finds no possible via media without. Ammu's desire for release from her fixed role is signified in her confronting her naked self-image in the mirror. Yet ironically it only heightens her sense of powerlessness. For she becomes acutely aware of her loss of youth. Ammu's solitary walks down the riverside (which Estha emulates twenty-five years later) is her way of distancing herself from the social role of Ammu which in Malayalam means 'mother', "on days like these there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporally set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcehood...an unmixable mix .. it was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day..." (Roy, 1997, p.44).

Kochamma whose only transgression was confined to a conversion, to spite parental authority for a failed attempt of union with an Anglican priest is a gross caricature of an embittered spinster. In a text which critiques the very construction of femininity, the baby grand aunt is a paradigm for the bourgeois spinster,-vindictive, repulsive and sadistic, "Baby Kochamma resented ammu ..." (Roy, 1997, p.45) Baby Kochamma's apprehension is symbolic of the official society's incapacity to imagine its radical 'other' as anything beyond 'chaotic' and thus bound to essentialise Ammu, Velutha and even the twins as primarily 'evil'. She is repelled by Ammu's sexual energy. Her total renunciation of her sexuality grants her admission into the hegemony. Like all the other Ayemenem women, she

too is financially dependent. Yet Roy is not sympathetic, neither to Mammachi nor to Baby Kochamma. In particular, hyperbole operates to make the latter, strikingly grotesque. The text is singularly devoid of any possibility for positive potential. The end demonstrates an ageing T.V. addict, who still dislikes the twins. This construction, even though it might have borne some affiliation to Roy's relatives, is ambiguous, and is still too harsh a treatment of an unmarried aunt, who naturally would seek an alignment with the official authority, to overcome an enormous sense of social insecurity.

Mammachi's fascinating appearance, "regal, unusual..." is subverted to "blind mother widow with a violin", who "packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chako's care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings, her man, -her only love" (Roy, 1997, p.166) she is an archetypal expository of Freud's assertion of the possibility of sexual undertones in parental affection. Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma who at eighty five makes the daily diary entry 'I love you' for a man to whom she never articulated her feelings in life, grow large in their metaphorical grotesqueness.

4. Gender; A Social Construction

In Ammu's dream Velutha is physically incapacitated. Ammu's dream of a one-armed man incapable of protecting her is the ambivalence in her attraction to Velutha. She is aware that he would be unable to protect her. The most virile masculine figure is socially handicapped, by being an untouchable, which at once alerts the reader to the social construction of masculinity. As Lauretis (1987) demonstrates, "Gender is not sex, a state of nature, but the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual and is predicated on the conceptual and rigid opposition of two biological sexes".

The construction of Velutha as the "God of small thing" demands observation. In an interview Roy asserts "God implies a certain largeness, omnipotence and power" (Eichert, 1997). Yet Velutha is an apposition of that very political construction. In the world of the fiction smallness emanates positive vibes. For largeness becomes that which is incorporated and sanctioned by a hegemonic vista of politics. This celebration of the minute pleasures of life engenders its preciousness. Velutha is ironically, in reality, an image of fertility; the masculine vigour he emanates is but one aspect. Amidst a vortex of human malleability, he is flawless. His attraction to the children and to Ammu is spontaneous. His willingness to dare, in the face of enormous social hostility, adds to the taste of myth. As Vanita (1997) too demonstrates, this may well be a deliberate ploy to heighten the sense of loss, as Velutha is the 'God of loss' as well.

It is however interesting to note that to Rahel and Estha at thirty-one it is Velutha's death, and the torment of their mute partnership in that death, which haunt their subconscious, "... they both knew that there were several perpetrators (beside themselves) that day. But only one victim" (Roy, 1997, p. 191). Estha's and Rahel's return to Ayemenem is a coming to terms with that horror. Estha's ceasing to talk and Rahel's failure both as a wife and as a career woman, are given as the final culmination of a procession of events, which leaves them marred perennially. When the adult Estha returns, he is almost effeminate. And Baby Kochamma fears not the virility of the man but the very opposite. He strolls in the drenching rain, down the riverside, which is violated with pollution. His seven-year-old wisdom subconsciously engendered by sexual abuse at the cinema, that "anything can happen to anyone and it is best to be prepared" (Roy, 1997, p. 194), is a child's spontaneous reaction to the malleability of life (in a novel singularly devoid of any natural catastrophe). But it is also an ironical commentary on society. The road-side figure, Mudlitharan on the other hand, is an reminder of the politics of physical survival. He is an ironical comment on a social body in which only a mentally incapacitated human could survive and find a semblance of happiness. (Roy 63, p. 1997)

The history house is a mute witness to both the polemical and the extreme conservative of human behavior. It witnesses the final manifestation of a history of violence; 'history' in the text obliquely denotes a threat to human aspirations. The history house is a symbol of the history of exclusion; its original owner was forced to abandon it as a punishment for his "illegitimate" sexual orientation. There Velutha is abused for enjoying a sexual freedom he was not entitled to. The history house the adult Rahel returns to is a modern hotel establishment. Yet it still has the capacity to evoke bitter memories. Roy affiliates the house to Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" where the only time the native boy speaks is when he announces "Mistah Kurt, he dead". Likewise, Velutha and Ammu are both denied a voice, in Ayemenem.

CONCLUSION

A gender study of Roy's fiction proves to be quite interesting. Considered as one of the most outrageous texts, by the conservatives in India, it offers ample space for a severe critique of the body politic. Yet, the novel illustrates Bathkin's (1982) insistence that a novel is dominated by ideology. Her gender representation is precarious. Apart from the demi-divine Velutha, who is manifested to perfection, all the other male characters exert tyranny to maintain patriarchy. Yet in its absence the Ayemenem house, in

the present, is a site of decay; essentially anarchic. Roy's critique of a violent order, crumbles at the closure. The world of the fiction is one, which suffers unduly on account of oppression, but could perhaps crumble in its absence. A decaying house and an ageing grand aunt promise only a bleak future.

Baby Kochamma who is both financially and socially lacking in power aligns with the power structure, as a technique for survival. The other available option, transgression demands too severe a sacrifice. Yet Roy's treatment emulates a woman growing more and more grotesque, in the fictitiously famous spinster-aunt syndrome.

What is apparent is that the unconscious of the novel is in conflict. It lurks in every emotionally charged scene and by the end of the text it develops into a dichotomy. The adult Rahel's struggle with the past largely is determined by the memory of her mother. But Ammu in Rahel's perspective continues to be an accused, "little ammu who never completed her corrections ..." (Roy, 1997, p.159) To Rahel Ammu is the mother who defied the norms of motherhood, who abandoned them. Even though the visible hatred the child Rahel fostered is clearly diluted, the adult Rahel fails to recognize her mother as a victim. It is Velutha she mourns. Ammu's emotional and physical bankruptcy aligns with the stereotypical literary device which represents the subjugated woman as the helpless victim. As Vanita (1997) asserts "Ammu's death seemed more like the novelist succumbing to the Indian -woman-as - victim narrative convention than anything else". Roy subverts the history of female achievement by violating a character of rebellion. And Roy's treatment of Ammu and Rahel's failure to sympathise with Ammu's premature death are at odds with each other.

Ammu's 'nalley' (tomorrow) is ironic. Roy insists that this was a deliberate attempt to infuse some degree of hope into a text devoid of any positive vibe. Yet the fatalistic fate of the transgressors and the burden the younger generation is subjected to stagger with, force the text to reject the future Ammu looks forward to. For it is a future which promises only violence, tyranny and guilt. Roy accuses and mocks history. But she excludes the history of female achievement-woman's ability to rise against the odds are negated. Hence Roy rejects the very mechanism of women's discourse, which attempts to discover a coherent and successful search of women's identity. As Barat (1996) demonstrates, "their discourse presents them as relentless seekers, triumphant in vicissitude, confident and self aware, capable of establishing their selfhood even within the limits of love and marriage"

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