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Women as the Oppressed In *The God of Small Things*

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Arundhati Roy is an acclaimed post-colonial Indian novelist to have bagged the Booker prize for her seminal work ‘The God of Small Things’ which was published in 1997. In this novel she beautifully studies the predicament of Indian women against the setting of Ayemenem, a southern Indian state of Kerala where the complex web of relationships enmesh the female characters subjecting them to repeated suppression and stifling their individual freedom. Roy as one of the prominent contemporary women writers in India takes us inside the consciousness of her modern educated middle class women characters to present their plight, fears, dilemmas, contradictions and ambitions.. Caught between patriarchy and tradition on the one hand, and self-expression, individuality independence on the other, her protagonists feel lost and confused and explore ways to fulfill themselves as a human beings. She delineates her women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations.

The novelist analyzes the gender oppression through the examination of the marital and inter-gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. All these female characters are resourceful, smart and belong to the affluent class but they are deprived in fully realizing their capabilities. They lack guts to openly defy the social order and are torn between traditional norms and modern attitudes. In their attempt to challenge the customs, laws, values of social and cultural boundaries, they commit moral transgressions which ultimately lead them toward their demise and destruction.

“Thanks to our wonderful male chauvinistic society” rightly Ammu had observed (P: 57). Through their trajectories of personal involvement in different issues, they interrogate the structures of caste, clan and gender in both implicit and explicit manner. Ammu, middle class bourgeois woman, a divorcee with two children, she is the female protagonist of the novel. Though she is educated and articulate, she is the victim of marriage that did not work out. “Her husband turned out to be not just a heavy drinker but a full blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic’s deviousness and tragic charm. “There were things about him that Ammu never understood. Long after she left him, she never stopped wondering why he lied so outrageously when he didn’t need to particularly when he didn’t need to” (P.40).. Her alcoholic husband used to inflict beastly treatment on her to the extreme end of satisfying the carnal pleasures of his boss, so that his job remains secure. Situation becomes so painful and unbearable that Ammu is forced to divorce him: “Drunken violence followed by post-drunken badgering” and ‘Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcome to her parents in Ayemenem.’ ((P.42))

Along with her dizygotic twins-Estha and Rahel, Ammu seeks refuge in her own home but her father’s house turns out to be a horrid place for her and she is subject to humiliation, insults and mental blows by her own family members. Ammu as a lady has great self-confidence in herself and she often outwits her own oxford educated brother, Chacko even though she was deprived of the opportunity to study and have an exposure like her brother. According to Chacko who is

always bent on marginalizing his own sister – “Ammu had no Locusts stand I” (P:57) and that “Ammu and Estha and Rahel were millstones around his neck” (P.85)

“Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty... she did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them.” (P.182.). The repeated rejections of Ammu by her own kith and kin compels her to seek emotional refuge in Velultha - a low caste or ‘untouchable’ carpenter. A clandestine love-affair develops between the two resulting in furtive sexual encounters which is in violation of the traditional norms of the Syrian Christian society. Because of her moral transgression the church also refused to bury Ammu. “Rahel thought she looked like a roman senator. Et tu, Ammu! She thought and smiled, remembering Estha!! (P162) .Thus “Ammu died in a grimy room in the Bharat lodge in Alleppey... She died alone. She was thirty-one. Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age.” (P.161). In the long run, Ammu is disowned by her society, separated ruthlessly from her children and faces a lonely death.

The second woman character is “Mammachi”, who is both Ammu and Chacko’s mother. She possesses the adept business skills and starts a pickle factory all by herself, but her husband Pappachi “would not help her with the pickle-making because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high ranking ex-govt. official” He beat her constantly for no apparent reason “the beatings weren’t new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place” (47-48). After Pappachi’s death Chacko, her son took over the factory from her and in losing her factory Mammachi was marginalized in terms of both clan and gender. She was made a sleeping partner. According to Chacko’s philosophy ‘what’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine.’ (P.57). Mammachi however does not resist her tyrannical son, she concedes to his “Men’s Needs” as Chacko flirts with “pretty women who worked in the factory.” forcing them to “sit at table with him and drink tea” (p.65) much to the dismay of his own mother. Mammachi is artistic. She has the skills of playing the violin. When her music teacher praises her exceptional talent before her husband her music lessons are stopped abruptly because of the fear that his wife may surpass Pappachi. However, unlike Ammu, Mammachi never questions the conditions and accepts the reality passively and with a strange ‘resilience’ in her character. Her acquiescence is a defensive gesture of her story sense of ‘endurance’ to undergo the torture and trauma without speaking it out.

Baby Kochamma is the sister of Pappachi who is another maltreated victim in the novel. She receives the shock of her life when her dream of marrying father Mulligan, an Irish priest gets shattered. To win him, she converts herself to Roman Catholic faith but ultimately she is a failure and starts living in isolation in the Ayemenem house. Baby Kochamma conspires with the inspector and puts Velultha behind the bars, where he is severely beaten to death. This attitude of negativism is perhaps due to the unjust and malicious treatment meted out to her in her life: “the fear of being dispossessed”. She felt that she had the “fate of the wretched Man-less woman.” Amitabh Roy in his analysis of Baby Kochamma’s character opines : “ It is a pity that she submits in the name of decency and honor to the very sexist, casteist and communal prejudices that have stood in her way and denied fulfillment to her” (2005,P.62) Thus like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma also apparently submits to the patriarchal social norms without any hesitation but if closely examined she puts up a line of implicit resistance against the biased socio-political and economic order in the post-colonial India.

Rahel is the offspring of divorced parents, daughter of Ammu who is deprived of conventional parental love. She lives with the stigma of a mixed parent age, both religious (as her father was Hindu and Ammu a Syrian Christian) and ethnic (as father was a Bengali and Mother is a Keralite). She has a hard time in School and was expelled three times from the Nazareth convent and refused to be co-opted by the school. She is disliked by her relatives-Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria and even Chacko. She considers Velultha to be a father figure with whom she plays. "She knew his back. She'd been carried on it. More times than she could count". (p.73). When Rahel discovers about the sexual liaison of Ammu with Velultha, she locks herself in the bedroom. When Police arrests Velultha Rahel goes to the police station with her brother Estha to identify Velultha as a criminal. Being the victim of a dysfunctional family, she fails to connect with the people around her and lacks self-confidence. The most unnatural act of social transgression committed by Rahel is her incestuous love for her twin brother Estha- which is perhaps her implicit resistance toward the social order. "Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin".(p.93) The only person with whom Rahel has harmony, an empathetic link is her own twin brother Estha, eighteen minutes her senior. Their personality's balance each other like the two halves of a circle; complementing each other.

She is a girl with an active imagination. For instance when she feels scared, she imagines that Pappachi's moth is crawling on her heart with icy legs. While attending Sophie's funeral, she imagines Sophie Mol turning over in her coffin. Like a lost soul Rahel wanders in her life. She takes up architecture program in Delhi without any thought or interest, there she meets Larry McCaslin the researcher, marries him and goes to the U.S.A. She drifts into marriage, "Like a passenger drifts into an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge"(p.18) But soon divorced she returns to Ayemenem, her birth place. The only person with whom, she has compatibility, a balancing harmony is her brother Estha.. Like Ammu, Rahel at a young age also learns to dream and imagine and like her she is ultimately disowned and rejected by the society. In a relationship with her brother Rahel transgresses the traditional boundaries of a defined and social relationship. While Ammu has an illicit relationship with Velultha, Rahel indulges in a sexual relationship with her own brother. Both in a way transgress the social norms of the traditional Ayemenem society – Their transgression is perhaps a deliberate act to defy and to challenge the society where in, they have to survive as the oppressed victims.

Arundhati Roy in her novel has a sensitive understanding of her female characters. They are not emancipated, though they are affluent and belong to upper middle class. However, at the same time they cannot be called passive. There is a continuous struggle within their selves to seek out of their confined territories and to interpret their lives with individual freedom. They suffer oppression in the patriarchal world order, but they don't cry or suffer in isolation. Rather they try to bring about a change through resistance which takes shape of a transgressional behavior. They make efforts to interrogate the structures of caste, clan and gender in an implicit as well as an explicit manner.

If we make a comparative Study of Roy's God of Small Things with Chinua Achebe's "**Things fall apart**" we realize that though the female characters belong to two different worlds, countries still they share the common bond of oppression. Achebe makes no attempt to conceal the negative features of the Igbo Society including wife beating, taboos and infanticide. The Igbo culture is undoubtedly patriarchal in a number of ways. As for instance in the trial scene in

Things Fall Apart women are depicted as “outsiders”, looking on from the “fringe” and not participating in the administering of justice. The novel describes two instances when Okonkwo beats his second wife, once when she did not come to prepare his meal and second when she referred to him as one of those “guns that never shot” (p.81)

Similar portrayal of women has also been reflected by Shashi Deshpande, the Indian novelist in her novels. She has drawn great critical attention and acclaim for her sensitive and realistic representation of the Indian middle-class women giving intimate insight into the psyche of the middle class Indian women who feel oppressed by their patriarchal socialization. Deshpande's women protagonists are victims of the prevalent gross gender discrimination first as daughter and later as wives. She has given an honest portrayal of her fears, sufferings, disappointments and frustrations. Besides revealing the woman's struggle to secure self-respect and self-identity, the author lays bare the multiple levels of oppression, including sexual oppression. In 'That Long Silence' Deshpande's success lies in realistically depicting the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for the self or identity. Jaya undergoes great mental trauma because she refuses to go into hiding with her husband as an enquiry against his financial irregularities is on. Even her journalistic writings are circumscribed by her husband's likes and dislikes. Jaya hovers between submission and assertion but the repeated accusations of her husband compel her to react sharply. The earlier impulsive Jaya becomes a mature woman, and with her realization, whenever she looks back on her life, there is hardly any sense of nostalgia or yearning for the past; it is much more a feeling of suppressed anger which can burst out any time..

In her other novel “The Binding Vine”, she deals with the personal tragedy of the protagonist Urmi and focuses attention on victims like Kalpana and Mira: victims of man's lust and woman's helplessness. Shashi Deshpande's second novel 'In The Dark Holds No Terrors', is about Saru, the protagonist an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. Her relations with her husband become unseeingly strained and she returns home for solace. Saru is ignored in favour of her brother, Dhruva and no parental love is ever showered on her and she is not even given any importance. Saru's mother's discriminatory behaviour makes Saru feel unloved and unwanted leading to a sense of alienation and estrangement. Her hatred towards her mother is so acute that she becomes rebellious just to hurt her. “I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, wound her, make her suffer” (The Dark Holds No Terrors 142). The hatred drives her to leave home for Bombay where she falls in love with her college mate and marries him against her parents' wishes. However after some time she returns again to her parental home to escape from her husband Manohar's sadism. This temporary withdrawal helps her to view her situation objectively. In all her novels thus Shashi Deshpande present a realistic picture of the gross-gender inequality prevailing in our society. A close study of Shashi Deshpande's novels reveals her deep insight into the plight of Indian women who feel smothered and fettered in a tradition-bound, male dominated society. Her protagonists are thus victims of the Indian Patriarchy and after initial submission resist the oppressive situation, there by reflecting the author's view that a woman must assert herself within marriage to preserve her identity. .

Even in the novels of Shobha De, the metropolitan modern novelist of Mumbai, she draws our attention to the subject of women's exploitation, discrimination and marginalization. Karuna the protagonist of **Socialite Evenings** is the perfect example of the misery of women in India. She suffers due to the callous and non responsive attitude of her husband who treats her as a mere object subjecting to his will, due to which she suffers from a loss of identity. Similarly Anjali, a young socialite, also suffers because of her incompatible marriage and her husband's oppressive attitude. In **Snapshots** the women are projected like playthings for men in a patriarchal society. Aparna, Rashmi, Swati and Noor are all victims of male tyranny. In the novel **Second Thoughts** it is again a sad tale of Maya, an oppressed wife and her husband Ranjan who treats her like a commodity.. She is an engineer but she is not allowed to take up a part-time job. It is due to Ranjan's traditional attitude and feeling of superiority that Maya feels trapped in a miserable life. However like Roy's women, the female characters in Shobha De's novels also protest against oppression and fight for their equality in the male-dominated Indian society. In this respect they are more aggressive and direct in their approach as compared to the women in *God of Small Things*. In **Socialite Evenings** the extra marital relationship of Karuna with Krish is retaliation against her insensitive husband. Finally she divorces him and rejects to conform to the traditional image of woman anymore. Similarly in **Starry Nights** Aasha Rani, through her sexual encounters with different men demolishes the mythical image of woman as the one suppressed by patriarchy. Aasha, Rita, Linda Shonali and others are bold and rebellious who protest against their exploitation and try their best to assert their identities in the male world.

Thus Arundhati Roy in the line of De and Deshpande unhesitatingly delineates the women characters against the patriarchal structures which is one of insensitivity and control. Like the seekers, in quest of autonomy and freedom, the different women characters in **God of Small Things**, are placed at different levels in their march towards emancipation. At one end is Mammachi who is passive and at the other extreme is Ammu and Rahel who operate from their conscious levels. They take the bold step to transgress the defined boundaries of the traditional societies. Roy's women are the seekers longing for freedom and allocating spaces for them. In their struggle lie their victory and self-pride. Like the 'new women' they are in search of their self-identity and liberation.

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